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My experience with Rare games goes back further than I think I fully realised until the release of *Rare Replay*. If you had asked me before that compilation was launched I would have said that the game that brought me into the Rare fold was *Donkey Kong Country*. It was a gift that was plugged into our SNES on Christmas morning. We stepped into the room to see it on screen, which was a rather pleasant surprise. Suffice to say, my brother and I kept out of our parent's hair for most of the rest of the day thanks to that.

But actually the first Rare game I played was *Pinbot* on the NES, although at that time I wasn't quite as aware of developers as I would become. This was quickly followed by *Digger T. Rock*, another NES classic, later featured on the *Rare Replay* collection, which is what sparked it back into my memory. I remember *Digger T. Rock* being the first game that really seeped under my skin. There was something about the music and crunchy digging sound effect that gave playing the game a transportive quality. It captivated and terrified me and it wasn't even really all that scary.

It's the captivating quality that I would find again and again through the years with Rare as *Donkey Kong* gave way to *Killer Instinct* and *GoldenEye 007*, *Diddy Kong Racing* and *Banjo-Kazooie*. It's a studio that has been there throughout my gaming life and it has kept on delivering along the way.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR




BELIEVE



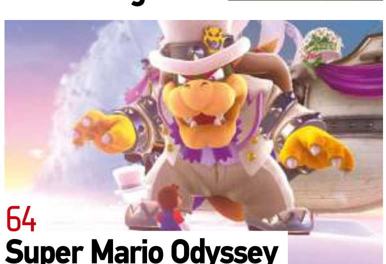
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SEA OF THIEVES

We take to the high seas with Rare and find out why this is one of the most exciting games on the horizon



DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN IS FRAUGHT WITH TENSION AND PARALYSING DECISIONS

→ HANDS-ON WITH A CINEMATIC MASTERPIECE IN THE MAKING

FORMAT: **PS4** | PUBLISHER: **SONY** | DEVELOPER: **QUANTIC DREAM** | RELEASE: **2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

Quantic Dream has never been one for following convention. It has built its reputation by going against the grain and, should you love the results or loathe them indiscriminately, it's difficult to deny the assertion that there's nothing in this industry quite like a Quantic Dream production. For 18 years now the studio, led by the ever-enigmatic creative pairing of David Cage and Guillaume de Fondaumière, has put all of its time, energy and resources into creating unique and divisive videogames; challenging and creative works of branching fiction that are as determined to be considered interactive movies as they are practical showcases of a hardware generation's true power and potential. The studio's latest – *Detroit: Become Human* – looks to add to this legacy in a convincing fashion. It's a complex web of decisions and actions not yet acted upon, weaved around observational puzzles and an enveloping narrative, one that only seeks to expand the more of yourself that you pour into and dedicate to it.

If *Heavy Rain* and *Beyond: Two Souls* sought to put the player into the role of a determined – if not frequently ill-informed – storyteller, *Detroit* is far more concerned with casting you as director. The story written in the scenes themselves is unique to you; guided by your creative vision as the chemistry between characters, situations and actions begins to reveal itself and congeal in the moments for thought that you can wrestle away from the frantic pacing that the scenarios quite frequently demand.

We were recently given the opportunity to get our hands on a new build of *Detroit*, with the impetus on exploring drastically different eventualities born out of our approach and attention to detail throughout one particular scene of the game. If you've been following *Detroit* for a while you'll have no doubt seen aspects of it play out in the trailers before, but being presented with the chance to pore over it multiple times has given us a real sense of what Quantic Dream is trying to achieve here.

The protagonist? Connor; an advanced android assigned by the police of Motor City to investigate and navigate situations involving machines that deviate from their core directives – rules of living loosely arranged around Isaac Asimov's fabled Three Laws Of Robotics, torn from the pages of the author's 1942 short story *Runaround*. The situation? Crisis negotiation; a young girl's life hangs – quite literally – in the balance as wounded police scream for assistance from a blood-soaked rooftop, a swift and determined response is required for anybody to walk away with their lives. The target? Daniel; a rogue android revolting against his decommission and replacement, his plight only revealing itself the further you insert yourself into the situation as it unfolds in real time. »

IN BRIEF
A neo-noir thriller from the studio responsible for *Heavy Rain* and *Beyond: Two Souls*



THE WIDER STORY

→ Exploring the interweaving threads of Detroit

While our hands-on session was focused around Connor, engaging in crisis negotiation to help save lives and end aggression, the scope of *Detroit* is far wider. The plot actually revolves around three androids, although the paths of each are intertwined by fate. There is Kara (played by Valorie Curry), who escapes the factory she was made in to explore her new-found sentience; Markus (Jesse Williams), an android devoted to releasing others from a life of servitude, causing an uprising in the process; and Connor (Bryan Dechart), tasked with hunting down other androids that have become defiant against the humans that rule over them. *Detroit* itself will revolve around these characters and the natural conflict points and emotional touchstones that traditionally accompany such a story; with these leading figures able to die early into the game, pushing the story to forge ahead without them, it's clear that the impetus will be on carefully navigating choices and decisions like never before.

From the moment you step in to the penthouse apartment/messy crime scene to the moment you leave it – and in whatever form that may take – *Detroit* is unrelenting in its attempts to fully arrest your attention. Every gunshot, an erratic system shock; the escalation of tension is palpable, the result of magnificent audio and visual design combining with excellent observational puzzles, carefully hidden event triggers, and a furious forward momentum that's as terrifying to behold as it is intoxicating.

In this instance we were safe in the knowledge that we had the time and opportunity to try this scene over and over. But when *Detroit* launches in 2018 we won't have that same luxury. You make a series of decisions and are forced to live with the consequences, that is, after all, Quantic Dream's core design ethos. While some of those consequences may well be immediate and reactionary, others may not reveal themselves until hours later – hell, it's possible to lead one of the three starring protagonists to their death and cut their story paths off entirely if you aren't careful. Mindful of this as we begin to approach this hostage situation, it doesn't take long to feel as if we are caught up in an event demanding a defter touch than we could ever hope to contribute, out of our depth and looking for guidance – it felt, in a sense, paralysing. Because if any one thing seems clear above all else it's this: in *Detroit*, indecision is the real killer.

> "IF ANY ONE THING SEEMS CLEAR ABOVE ALL ELSE IT'S THIS: IN DETROIT, INDECISION IS THE REAL KILLER"

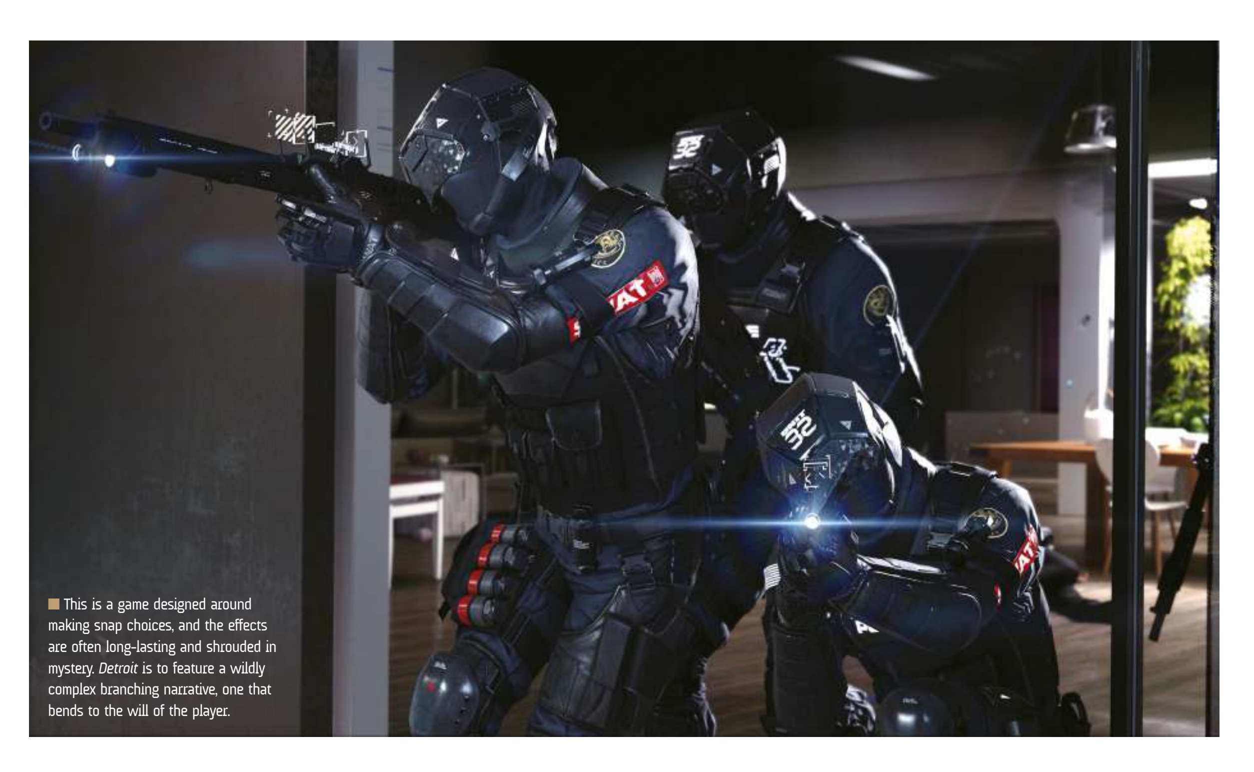
Moving around the apartment we are given our first opportunity to investigate the scene. Police helicopters can be heard buzzing overhead while police officers bark orders at the android teetering on the edge of the rooftop, gun and hostage in hand. Occasionally a gunshot will ring out and a body will thud to the floor – it never failed to catch us off guard, startling us every damned time, much to the amusement of surrounding Sony representatives. But that's not important. What *is* important is how *Detroit* makes time itself feel like your greatest enemy.

Searching through rooms and possessions of the victims, digitally recreating important scenes to get a better sense of what occurred – not unlike the crime scene investigations found in *Batman: Arkham VR* – all contributes to your understanding of the situation and your ability to try and resolve it. The apartment is a rich tapestry of information, some pertinent, some simply world building, all of it important. This is a scene fraught with panic and intensity, and you'll want as much information as possible before confronting Daniel face-to-face. Although waiting too long to move forward with your negotiation can also have negative ramifications, with the police eager to terminate the malfunctioning android without your assistance. Delay and bad things can happen; approach the situations flippantly, bad things can happen; walk into the final scene with a hastily assembled recollection of events and, well, bad things can still happen.

EMOTIONAL TETHER

Detroit is demanding of your attention. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that it is already one of the most visually impressive videogames slated for 2018, but it was the direction that really caught our eye. The camera cutaways and forced perspective shifts gives incredible weight to some of the scenes, while your ability to take control of the action directly and further investigate points of interest only serves to build a more complete experience. The digital acting is incredible, the faces realistic and evocative, while the motion capture has a nuance to the movement seldom seen in a videogame production. The depth and detail to every scene, the technical fidelity to the entire production, really is something else – and it only serves to tether your attention to the emotional weight behind the situation.

As you eventually step out to confront Daniel face-to-face all of your preparation will come to a head. Discoveries made inside will open up new lines of dialogue, modes of provocation, and ways to resolve the situation peacefully; Connor can be edged forward with the thumb stick, giving you the ability to move in closer to the conflicted android and check on the surrounding victims. Move too slowly and you



This is a game designed around making snap choices, and the effects are often long-lasting and shrouded in mystery. *Detroit* is to feature a wildly complex branching narrative, one that bends to the will of the player.





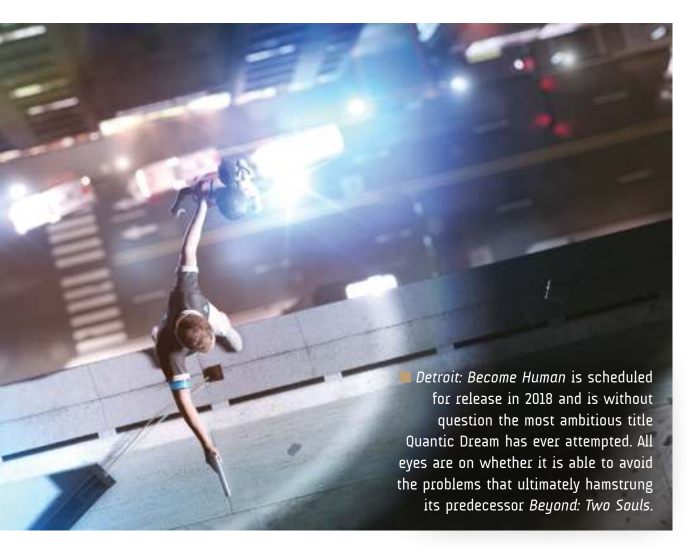


■ We were taken aback by the graphical and audio presentation of *Detroit*. Sony exclusives have a tendency to push the current generation of consoles, but we haven't seen anything look quite this sharp or detailed before.









■ *Detroit: Become Human* is scheduled for release in 2018 and is without question the most ambitious title Quantic Dream has ever attempted. All eyes are on whether it is able to avoid the problems that ultimately hamstrung its predecessor *Beyond: Two Souls*.

might be too far away to make a real difference, get too close too fast and you may just push him over the edge. Your responses and interactions in this negotiation are timed, and time is more than certainly not on your side. It's a tense affair, with hope fleeting between the seconds. This is, quite clearly, the most dramatic, polished and cinematic game Quantic Dream has ever delivered – the production value of *Heavy Rain* and *Beyond: Two Souls,* but offering a level of restraint to its premise and execution that eluded its predecessors.

There are, we're told, six different endings to this demo. We saw three; one gratifying in its resolution, the other two horrifying eventualities that have us re-considering our own humanity. *Detroit* isn't afraid to challenge the player with its story, characters, or scenarios and it certainly doesn't pull any punches. The question, as always, will be whether Quantic Dream is aware enough of its past failings and missteps to actually pull this off as a cohesive package.

That remains to be seen. *Detroit* is unquestionably the most ambitious project the studio has ever worked on. Bursting onto the scene with a dense sci-fi adventure is difficult enough in the triple-A space as it is, mix in a politically charged narrative offering up societal reflections and a branching story rich in possibility, one designed to bend and twist to the player's every whim, and you've got another choose-you-own-adventure ripe with the potential to stun as easily as it can fall on its face. But after close to two decades of lessons learned and refinement to its core practices, we're confident that *Detroit* will deliver something even more polished than previous Quantic Dream games.

THE PICTURE AROUND RED DEAD REDEMPTION II CONTINUES TO DEVELOP



→ ROCKSTAR'S LATEST REVEAL OFFERS SOME ANSWERS, A LOT MORE QUESTIONS, AND GORGEOUS NEW VISTAS

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR STUDIOS** | RELEASE: **Q2 2018** | PLAYERS: **1-TBC**

Allow us to introduce you to Arthur Morgan, your new *Red Dead Redemption II* protagonist. We would never go so far as to say 'hero' about any character you play as in a Rockstar game, but such a moniker would appear to be even more ill-fitting in Morgan's case. The latest reveal of the game has suggested that the redemption element of it may not be at the forefront of Morgan's concerns as he gallops around the West, extorting money on behalf of the infamous Dutch van der Linde.

So, what we're expecting is something even closer to the ethically grey, no-holds-barred, outlaw simulation experience that we connected so heavily with in *Red Dead Redemption* the first time around. John Marston may have been a man looking to turn his life around and getting drawn back in, but Morgan strikes us as someone still very much comfortable on the wrong side of the law. There are still a lot of specifics to be revealed about Rockstar's latest, not least a definitive release date in Spring 2018, but there's already a bunch we can ascertain from what's been shown off so far.

"MORGAN STRIKES US AS SOMEONE STILL VERY MUCH COMFORTABLE ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE LAW"



A MAN OF ACTION

It seems pretty clear to us that Arthur Morgan is the ground-level muscle of the Dutch van der Linde gang. We've seen him roughing up citizens looking to get money for his boss and he seems to take a great deal of pleasure from their discomfort. We can't help but be reminded of Samuel L. Jackson's Jules from *Pulp Fiction*; a character who seemed to delight in the chaos he wrought, only to turn on a dime when he finally faced his own death.



TRAIN GANG

Train heists people! It's the pinnacle of the Wild West fantasy experience and we've got them all but confirmed now with the most recent gameplay reveals. It also appears likely that you can attack these targets during the day or night, making good use of the different scenarios that can play out depending on those conditions. It has to be night heists though, right? That definitely seems like the way to go.

IN BRIEF

Rockstar takes to the Western frontier once again to deliver a new sandbox of six-shooters, broncos and outlaws on the run

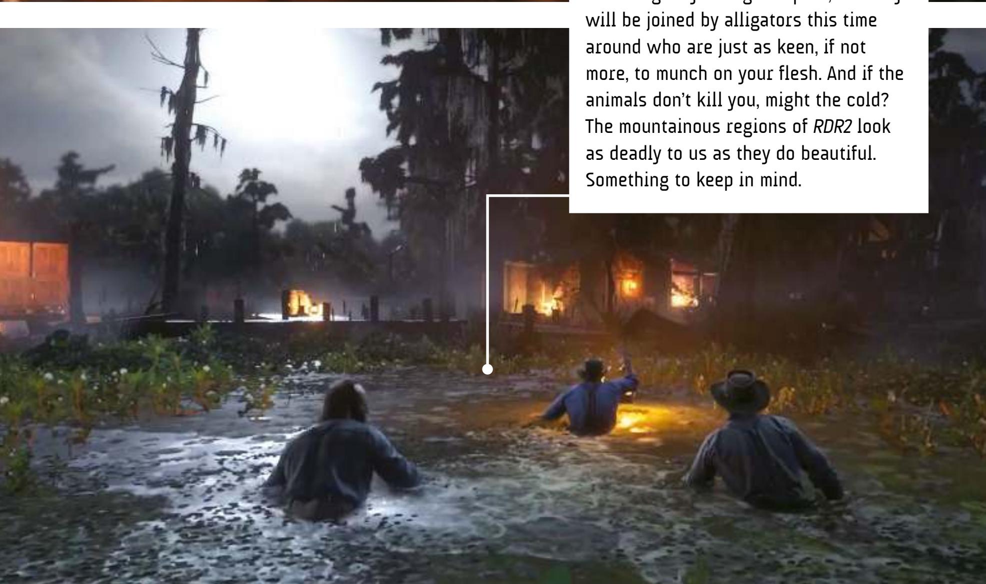
ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

We knew that the landscape of *RDR2* would be pretty varied, much as the last game had been, but we suspected we might see even greater heights and threats hidden within. Bears are returning as you might expect, but they will be joined by alligators this time around who are just as keen, if not more, to munch on your flesh. And if the animals don't kill you, might the cold? The mountainous regions of *RDR2* look as deadly to us as they do beautiful. Something to keep in mind.



BAD TO THE BOW

Bow-and-arrow combat has become pretty popular over the last few years. *Tomb Raider* sort of started a new trend that has since been perfected at two different ends of the spectrum by *Horizon Zero Dawn* and *Breath Of The Wild* earlier this year. It's going to be interesting to see how *RDR2* interprets the form and melds it into what we expect will be a robust gun-slinging mechanic. Perhaps we should expect some stealthier approach options too.



CONVERSATION IS KING IN NO TRUCE WITH THE FURIES

→ A NEW BREED OF ISOMETRIC RPG

FORMAT: **PC** | PUBLISHER: **HUMBLE BUNDLE** | DEVELOPER: **ZA/UM STUDIOS** | PLAYERS: **1** | RELEASE: **Q4 2017**

In recent years we have been witness to the revival of the isometric RPG. Many of these titles have sought to pick up where the classics left off, continuing on in the same vein as *Wasteland* and *Fallout*, of *Icewind Dale* and *Baldur's Gate*. But as we have seen so many times in the past, it can often take a bold independent developer to really breathe new life into tired genres. ZA/UM Studio might be walking in the shadow of Obsidian and inXile Entertainment, but it's looking to break out of it with *No Truce With The Furies*.

A daring proposition, *No Truce With The Furies* is built around a complex system of cause and effect, wherein all of the action is dealt out through dialogue. Everything from the incidentals to violent confrontations are handled within the, frankly, impressive dialogue system; every conversation is a literature heavy battle of consideration and determination – hit rolls, armour, weapons, lives and other genre staples are all present and correct, they are just represented by vowels and consonants rather than a direct button prompt.

24 skills across four stat proficiencies are there to be poured into, giving you the space and freedom to properly develop your character and your approach to the world and its inhabitants. The game has been built around freedom, giving you the space to approach every situation as you see fit – your character's traits and proficiencies expanding and carrying on from one conversation to the next.

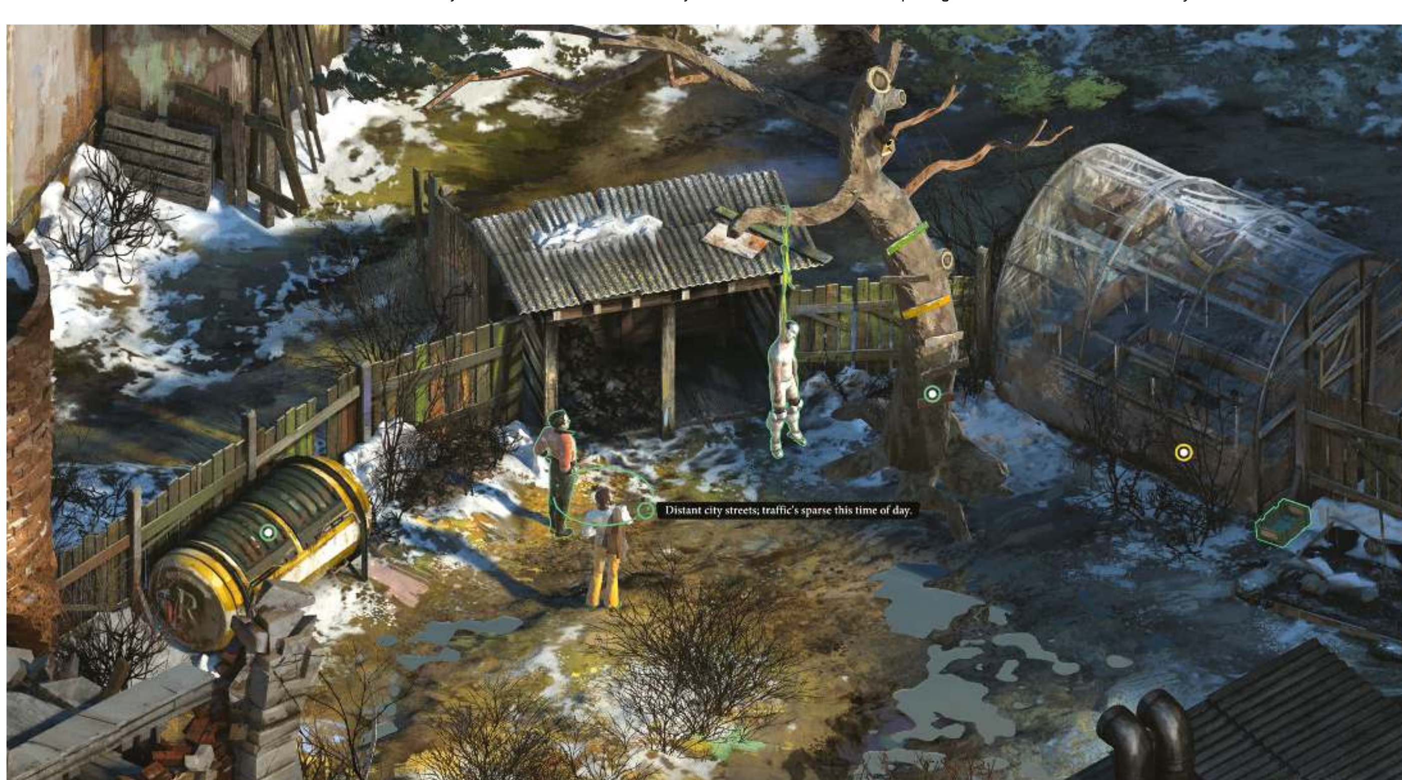
IN BRIEF
An isometric RPG combined with a procedural cop show, define your legacy in a decaying world

This is important to note, because *No Truce With The Furies* is essentially a detective game – a "procedural cop RPG," as the team would describe it, where you get to decide how you will investigate a huge open-ended case in the city of Revachol. It is posited that your character is fundamentally flawed, a cop chewed out by the system looking to solve a case on the wrong side of the city; there's a thrill to seeing how quickly things can go wrong, and the consequences can be heartbreaking. With so many natural RPG systems rolled into the dialogue system – success/failure rolls and the like – it's only too easy to get wrapped up in what the studio is trying to achieve here. It's ambitious; thoughtful, excellently written and incredibly different to anything else out there.

No Truce With The Furies doesn't have a solid release date pencilled in, but it has been indicated to us that the original release window of 'late 2017' might be too ambitious. The game is coming together wonderfully, and this is a must see for any of you feeling burned out on the familiarity of *Pillars Of Eternity*, *Wasteland*, and *Torment: Tides Of Numenera*.



Above: All of the action is handled through conversation in *No Truce With The Furies*. The game can quickly flip between funny and casual to heartbreaking and tense. It's RPG systems are very well implemented.



Below: Sadly, the screenshots don't do this game justice. It looks incredible when it's in front of you, like walking into a watercolour painting.



10 REASONS TO GET HYPED ABOUT HORIZON ZERO DAWN: THE FROZEN WILDS

→ RETURN TO THE HUNT

FORMAT: **PS4** | PUBLISHER: **SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT** | DEVELOPER: **GUERRILLA GAMES** | RELEASE: **7 NOV 2017** | PLAYERS: **1**

MORE OF A GOOD THING

1 Aloy is back in action in *Horizon Zero Dawn: The Frozen Wilds*. Pitched as an expansion to the early 2017 base game, *The Frozen Wilds* will continue the flame-haired hunter's journey through the unknown as you enter into a fresh territory full of dangerous new threats.

IT'S GOING TO BE HUGE

2 Offering a brand new map to tame, new weapons to locate and new settlements to explore, *The Frozen Wilds* is a substantial addition to the *Horizon* package with developer Guerrilla Games estimating that there will be over ten hours of new content for you to enjoy.

INVESTIGATE THE BANUK

3 The Banuk were a pretty mean bunch, hardened by the harsh conditions to the North. Their homestead, Ban-Ur, will be one of the new locations – which looks to be based around a heavily aged Yellowstone National Park and its accompanying Grand Prismatic Spring.

A DEADLY NEW THREAT

4 *The Frozen Wilds* is set to introduce a formidable new foe, one that even the Thunderjaw is afraid of. Thus far we've only seen it shrouded in smoke, toppling members of the Banuk tribe without hesitation. If Aloy wants to make it into the Mountain, it's going to require a hell of a battle first.

WHAT WILL THE THREAT BE?

5 This threat, it's going to be huge. Unlike anything seen so far. Guerrilla wants to keep it under wraps, but it's clearly a hulking, great big, mechanised gorilla, isn't it? Broad shouldered, lumbering and powerful, we're already trembling with excitement at the thought of facing off against it.

IN BRIEF

Aloy is back in this DLC to *Horizon Zero Dawn*, tasking you with exploring new mysteries and conquering new challenges







HISTORY UNCOVERED

6 *Horizon Zero Dawn* spent a lot of time letting you discover the history of this familiar-yet-foreign land and *The Frozen Wilds* DLC will be no different. Aloy is desperate to get up and into the Mountain, an area that seems to resemble the famous Devils Tower.

ANOTHER CHAPTER

7 Guerrilla wrapped up a few mysteries at the conclusion of *Horizon Zero Dawn*, leaving itself open to an inevitable sequel. That means you should expect *The Frozen Wilds* to tell a companion story – rather than carrying on from where *Horizon* left off. The studio is calling it an all-new chapter in Aloy's journey.

A NEW CHALLENGE

8 Aloy is clearly seen wearing her super-hardy Shieldweaver armour, certainly implying that the challenge to be found here will be unlike any other she has faced thus far. But it also hints to something far more enticing: could a New Game+ mode be on the way? Our gut instinct says yes.

DRIVEN BY TECH

9 After spending years crafting the necessary technology and development tools to make *Horizon* a reality, Guerrilla is keen to dive back in and give us more of a good thing. It has perfected its work with these systems, and that means *The Frozen Wilds should* look and play better than anything from the studio.

PS4 PRO ENHANCED

10 The 4K revolution is here and we are *loving* the results. Do you still need convincing that a 4K TV upgrade and PlayStation 4 Pro is the way to go? You just need to see *The Frozen Wilds* in action. It's undoubtedly one of the best-looking games on the market, an HDR showcase in its own right.

HOW REIGNS: HER MAJESTY IS LEVELLING UP A MOBILE HIT

→ WRITER LEIGH ALEXANDER EXPLAINS THE PROCESS BEHIND PENNING A GAME THAT'S ALL ABOUT NARRATIVE POSSIBILITIES AND PLAYER CHOICE

FORMAT: **PC, IOS, ANDROID** | PUBLISHER: **DEVOLVER DIGITAL** | DEVELOPER: **NERIAL** | RELEASE: **TBC 2017** | PLAYERS: **1**

R*eigns* was a fantastic interpretation of a choose-your-own-adventure style experience made accessible to a new generation on smartphones thanks to controls that were more like playing around with a dating app than an RPG. Now Nerial is returning with a sequel and has brought on writer Leigh Alexander to help flesh out a brand new story and new challenges for your seemingly immortal, but often clumsy monarch. We caught up with Alexander to discover the unique process in writing for such a heavily player-controlled experience.

What has your process been like for coming up with story ideas and interactions?

In terms of the narrative design, it all needs to originate with things that feel good in the Reigns system, which is about decisions in individual moments that come together to create, hopefully, a unique storyline and set of challenges for each reign. So it's all about the cards really – each one needs to offer a decision, convey information about the world, and create a feeling or experience for the player in just a few sentences.

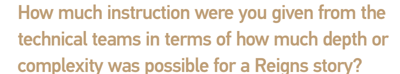
Everything comes out of that: the characters are defined by their relationship to the Queen, what do they tend to need from her, how are they likely to make them feel? If we want to create a strong moment, how do we express that through the statistical impacts? The system itself is the storyteller, and it's my job to fill it with words and rules that produce interesting results.

From the bird's eye view, it then becomes a matter of making sure certain themes come across from these series of small decisions.

Have you looked to any real historical records for inspiration on potential plot lines?

We sure did. Where the original game had a lot of the macabre humour of the darker Middle Ages, we thought it would be fun to visit a Renaissance and Enlightenment-inspired world this time. *Reigns: Her Majesty* shifts a bit away from kingdom management and rulership into the field of social politics and the expectations placed on the Queen – the player must attempt to gain power and influence the court as the King's wife, not as a sole all-powerful ruler – and we thought the time of Marie Antoinette would make a good reference point for that.

That said, it's a world of our own that we invented. Although it's inspired by history, and an environment where religious oppression clashes with new science and mysticism movements, it's still a fictional kingdom where magic exists, cheerful pirates roam the rivers, and you die dozens of times across hundreds of years.



How much instruction were you given from the technical teams in terms of how much depth or complexity was possible for a Reigns story?

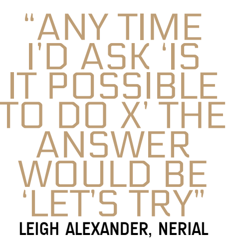
What's possible really does depend on the system itself. We did, in fact, try a few new things early on, like what if the "four powers" the player had to balance could refer to different values? But the further we moved away from the original mechanics, the less strong our ideas felt.

Not only did François [Alliot] design a brilliant and unique system with *Reigns 1*, he also made it possible to work with it using pretty simple text and command markers in a spreadsheet. It took some practice and study for me to develop the type of intuition about the system that he has. So in that respect I required and benefited from lots of instruction and patience. But once I learned a bit more about how to express myself using his tools, it was really great how willing he and the team were to allow for my ideas. Any time I'd ask "is it possible to do X" the answer would be "let's try", so I felt fortunate.

On a practical level, how do you go about structuring the potential plot threads of a Reigns experience?

I've been a big fan of interactive fiction, all kinds, since the days of the two-word command adventures of the early 1980s. Sometimes I even dream in IF [interactive fiction] languages. So there was an amount of intuition I could apply. So, you've written an interesting card, with an interesting decision, how might that have implications later? What are all the ways we can make the player feel like everything they do might have some kind of effect?




"ANY TIME I'D ASK 'IS IT POSSIBLE TO DO X' THE ANSWER WOULD BE 'LET'S TRY'"
LEIGH ALEXANDER, NERIAL

How I did it was really just to get in and start designing something, like, I'd imagine a moment that I thought would make a good Reigns decision, and I'd make that card, and then experiment with how it might point towards, return to, or develop out of existing commands, conditions, et cetera.

It's hard to tell if you've made a good loop until you actually see it in the build, but then of course we edit. I threw out, reconsidered or improved a lot of things as we went.

How have you looked to evolve the storytelling in *Reigns: Her Majesty*?

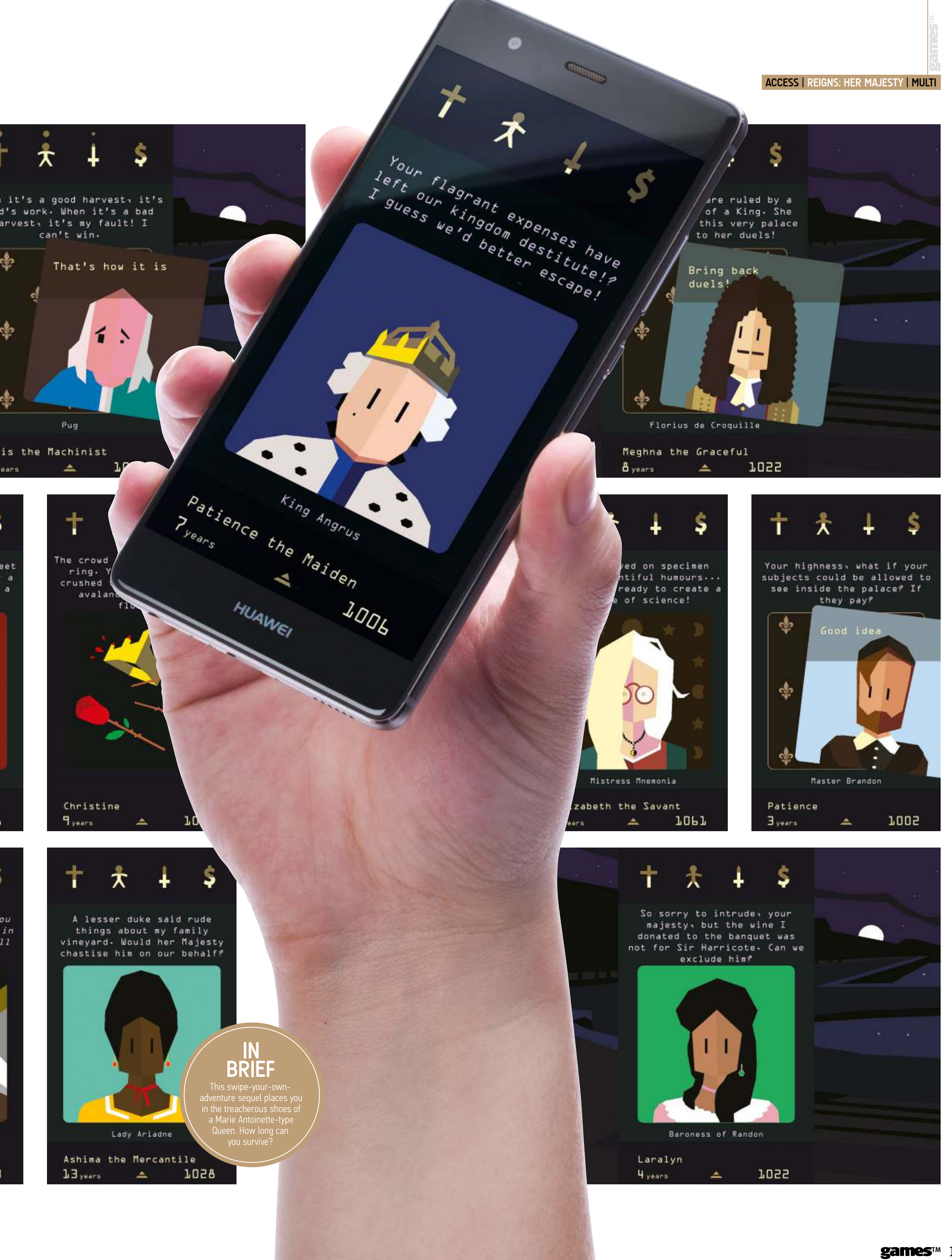
Reigns 1 had a wonderfully weird tone and sense of humour and I didn't really want to mess with that very much, but I did see the opportunity to enrich the writing on the sequel so that it could feel a little more intimate and more personal. Certainly in a game where you have a Queen trying to accomplish numerous things while pleasing a rogue's gallery of contradictory advisors, there's the chance to work with some ideas about society. Yes, you may be asked to make decisions about how to allocate resources in the wake of a natural disaster, but you also have to decide whether to give your spoiled kids more money or if it's appropriate to hug your handmaid.

I think *Her Majesty* does feel a little bit more like an interactive fiction game – hopefully we haven't sacrificed any of the comedy, briskness or surprises of *Reigns 1*. Hopefully we've made something with a feel all its own.







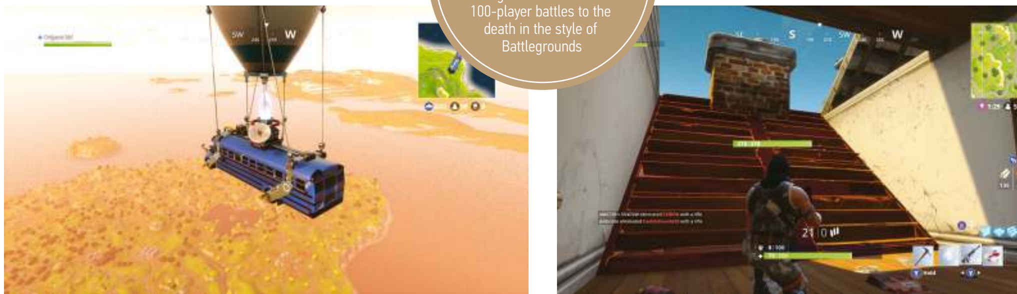


IN BRIEF

This swipe-your-own-adventure sequel places you in the treacherous shoes of a Marie Antoinette-type Queen. How long can you survive?

IN BRIEF

What was once a co-op construction and zombie horde game now introduces 100-player battles to the death in the style of Battlegrounds



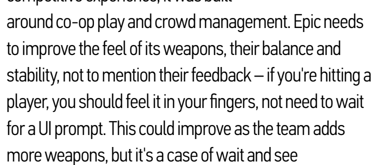
HOW CAN IT IMPROVE IN EARLY ACCESS?

→ The two biggest focus areas for Epic

WEAPON FEEL

GUNPLAY IS EVERYTHING

Fortnite was never designed to be a competitive experience, it was built around co-op play and crowd management. Epic needs to improve the feel of its weapons, their balance and stability, not to mention their feedback – if you're hitting a player, you should feel it in your fingers, not need to wait for a UI prompt. This could improve as the team adds more weapons, but it's a case of wait and see

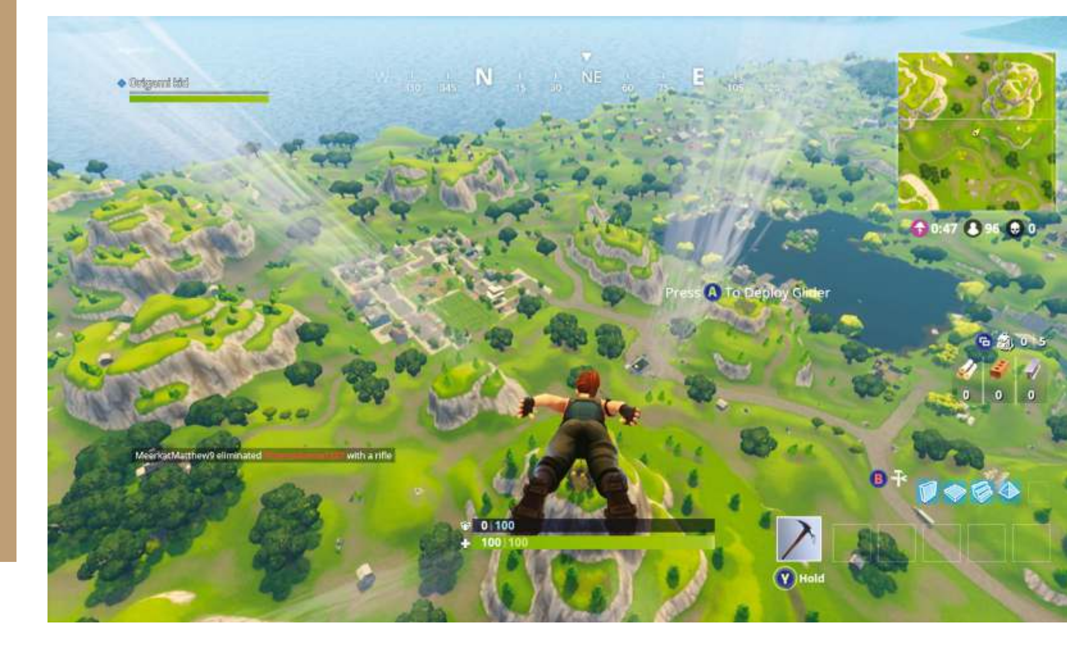




MAP CHANGES

SOMETIMES SIZE IS EVERYTHING

Epic needs to deliver a larger map if *Fornite* wants any prolonged success in Early Access, one that takes longer to cross and features more cover opportunities – be that through foliage or other environmental quirks. Basically, the map needs to be big enough to fit vehicles, as they drastically change the pace and dynamic of play once the circle starts closing in.



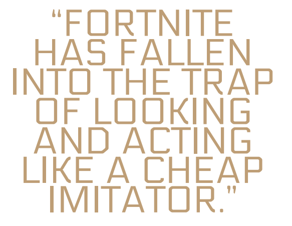
FORTNITE BATTLE ROYALE IS A CHEAP IMITATION OF THE REAL THING

→ EPIC STUMBLES OUT OF THE GATE WITH ITS OWN TAKE ON PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS

FORMAT: **PC, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **EPIC** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **OUT NOW** | PLAYERS: **100**

It's often said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. It's a delineation that is prevalent in all forms of entertainment, but particularly so in videogames – where so many of the worlds that we stomp through and play that we engage in have only come to be through years of diligent iteration. Is it a testament, for example, to the skill of id Software's earliest designers that so many are still using Team Deathmatch as a cornerstone of the FPS multiplayer experience? That question surfaces once again with *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*, fast becoming the most popular game in the world thanks to its impeccably balanced, effortlessly ruthless, delivery of Koushun Takami's *Battle Royale* experience. It is destined to become one of the most recycled game types in modern history, all the while *PUBG* itself soldiers on in Early Access. And that's supposed to be flattering for the folks at Bluehole, isn't it? That so many developers are rushing to take Brendan Greene's established rule set and execution – one originally licensed by Sony for H1Z1 and, later, Bluehole for *PUBG* – and deliver their very own take on it, in games that were never built to support it in the first place. It was Oscar Wilde who wrote that "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," though many forget the second half of that quote: "that mediocrity can pay to greatness."

Epic's *Fortnite Battle Royale* is just that, mediocrity caught in the shadow of true greatness. An echo of something far better than it could ever hope to be. While the core experience – the co-operative, base-building, tower defence game – continues to struggle through paid Early Access, Epic has gone ahead and launched its own Battle Royale game mode for free, beating Bluehole to the punch on a console by months. It's been popular too, with a reported seven million players flocking to *Fortnite* to get a taste of the 100-player, fight-to-the-last game experience that console players have been waiting to sample with baited breath ever since March of this year.



Fortnite as a co-operative concept is fun, if flawed in its current iteration. Its base building was simple and intuitive, designed to let players rally around small objective points to fend off waves of zombies within deadly electrical storms. But its third-person shooting mechanics are clunky, never designed for precision but for crowd management and horde mitigation; the UI is cumbersome and bloated, vehicles are non-existent, and the range of weapons somewhat lacking – all of this is fine within the context of the core experience. Presented within the framework of Battle Royale, however, and all of this leaves *Fortnite* feeling unequipped and unprepared for the demands of the genre.

It's always better to define your product on its own merits, rather than letting somebody else do it – here Epic has fallen into the trap of looking and acting like a cheap imitator. From the second you leap from the flying bus (rather than a plane), the problems become immediately apparent. The combat system isn't designed to support fast-paced, competitive play – in a mode where every shot counts, a system that doesn't support competitive play falls flat on its face. It lacks mechanical depth that should be standardised in any and all Battle Royale imitators; it isn't that *Fortnite* isn't realistic enough, that isn't the problem, it's that the game inherently limits your options for survival making every player encounter feel somewhat familiar, if not entirely rote. With an exaggerated bloom attached to every one of the (limited) weapons in the pool, combined with the lack of a prone stance, first-person aim, and the tightness of the third-person camera encounters just aren't wrapped in the same tension and immediacy as they are in *PUBG*.

The absence of vehicles has had a dire effect on the pace of the game; with everybody moving at the same speed there is little incentive to play at the edge of the map, to seek advantage by gaming the circle. Conversely, the map also feels too small; it's far too easy, if not inherently dull, to traverse – your landing position seems to have very little bearing over your chance of making it to the safe zone in time for its initial closure.

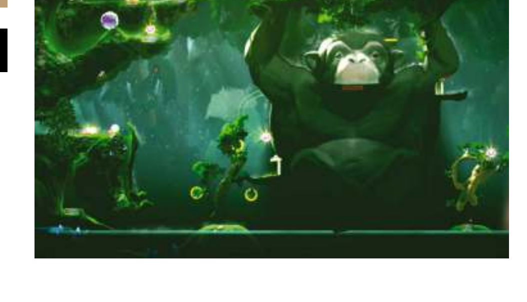
The art style, while striking and gorgeous to behold – a nice change from the somewhat dreary realism of other genre games – fails to provide proper opportunities for cover or stealth. Players are clearly visible across the map, while foliage isn't prevalent enough to provide any realistic cover opportunities. The intention, we suppose, is that the ability to build your own cover comes in to play here, although building any man-made structure essentially paints a giant, easily visible, target on your location for all of the other players to see.

Fortnite has taken all of the basics of the Battle Royale genre and tried to make it work to its advantage. Sadly, as it exists now, the game just isn't equipped to build the sort of fun, competitive and thrilling challenge that *PUBG* seems to offer so effortlessly. It's fun in short bursts, but not because of anything it does, necessarily, but purely because the core design and set up of the Battle Royale genre are so immediately fun and engaging to play around with. With so much work needed on the base *Fortnite* experience, we'd rather Epic focused its time and resources on getting that into fighting shape rather than diverting its attention into chasing the latest trends.

Above: The third-person shooting mechanics were never designed for tight, competitive play. They were designed for chipping away at hordes of zombies, fluid and floaty. That makes player encounters feel routinely disappointing. Left: Base building fits awkwardly into the Battle Royale genre. While it's fun to see players building their own structures within the shrinking circle it essentially points out your exact position on the map.

IN BRIEF
A unique blend of pinball mechanics and platforming collide in an open world in this new adorable indie game

THERE ARE GOOD TIMES TO BE HAD WITH **YOKU'S ISLAND EXPRESS**



→ YOU'RE A PINBALL WIZARD

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, SWITCH, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **TEAM 17** | DEVELOPER: **VILLA GORILLA** | RELEASE: **2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

Yoku is a pint-sized postman looking for retribution. After a mysterious deity destroys your post-office, it's up to you to catapult yourself around a gorgeous hand-painted island, collecting fruit, unlocking areas and completing quests in a surprisingly enjoyable pinball platforming design. This melding of genres works wonderfully; creating a game that is as chill as it is intoxicating to play, a great idea backed up by great execution.



PINBALL AS YOU'VE NEVER SEEN IT

1 You might not think it now, but the pinball and platforming genres are a match made in heaven. It takes just a few minutes with *Yoku's Island Express* to come to understand this; the traditional pinball bumpers have been integrated into the world itself, letting you catapult yourself between areas and platforms with ease and precision. Exploring feels fun and care-free, without losing the skill that comes with your typical pinball experience.



THE BASICS ARE THERE

2 There's a reason the mechanics of a pinball game don't often get used away from the table, and that's because precision and feel is everything. Developer Villa Gorilla has, even at this relatively early stage – the game is simply slated for a 2018 release – made the act of hitting launch pads and pinball paddles with Yoku frictionless. It merely feels like the table has been stretched out across a beautiful open world.



IT'S REALLY RELAXING

3 We don't get to say this too often, but there's something delightfully tranquil about *Yoku's Island Express*. It's the sort of game, for example, that the Switch has been crying out for in lieu of an Animal Crossing; it feels simultaneously relaxing and engaging, taxing enough to hold the attention without making you pour all of your energy into it. So long as the difficulty balance is maintained throughout, this will be the sort of game we need to make it through 2018 with our sanity intact.



FAITHFUL RECREATION

Frontier Developments is going all out on *Jurassic World Evolution*, working closely with Universal Pictures to bring every detail of this universe to life, with the studio even being given access to the source ILM 3D files to ensure that the dinosaur renders are as accurate and as realistically close to the films as humanly possible. We've been waiting a while for a faithful *Jurassic Park* game, and it's great to see Frontier being given the freedom to deliver it.



JURASSIC WORLD EVOLUTION TASKS YOU WITH CONTAINING A CATASTROPHE

→ FIRST DETAILS EMERGE ON FRONTIER'S LATEST PART MANAGEMENT SIM

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **FRONTIER DEVELOPMENTS**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **Q2 2018** | PLAYERS: **TBC**

For fans of *Jurassic Park*, it doesn't get much better than this. Ever since the release of the 1993 Spielberg classic we have long dreamed of creating our very own Jurassic Park, succeeding where John Hammond so famously failed. It'll be Summer 2018 when Frontier Developments – responsible for *Elite: Dangerous* and *Planet Coaster* – will deliver that unto us, where we will finally have the opportunity to construct, manage and evolve our very own Jurassic World.

Tasked with bio-engineering new dinosaur breeds and constructing attractions, containment and research facilities, *Jurassic World Evolution* will finally put us in control of operations on Isla Nublar and the surrounding islands of the Muertes Archipelago. From micro-managing the enjoyment of your eager visitors to ensuring that catastrophe doesn't turn all of your hard work into a second-act twist, this is quickly coming together to be the ultimate *Jurassic Park* experience – with Frontier going as far as to work closely with Universal Pictures to ensure that the game is as heavily detailed as possible. We've been waiting a long time for this, and everything we've seen so far suggests it's been worth it. Frontier has a lot of experience with park management sims, and so long as it sweats the details we should be onto a winner with this one.





DEVELOPMENT PATHS

While building up your park you will be tasked with following three development paths: Entertainment, a route made to ensure you give your dino-enthusiast visitors as much fun as possible; Security, a path that you'll need to invest heavily in should you want to introduce deadlier dinosaurs to your park while still keeping people safe; and Science, which is designed to let you study the prehistoric creatures and their way of life.

A SLOW PROGRESSION

Jurassic World Evolution will begin on a single island, with your primary goal that of fossil excavation and eventual bio-engineering of different dinosaurs. As your park grows you'll be able to expand across different islands – there will be five in total – with each delivering different resources and dangers. You'll not only need to contend with different natural disasters, such as tropical storms, but general upkeep of security and park infrastructures.

"FRONTIER HAS ACCESS TO THE SOURCE ILM 3D FILES TO ENSURE THAT THE DINOSAUR RENDERS ARE AS ACCURATE TO THE FILMS AS POSSIBLE"

IN BRIEF

Bring your very own Jurassic Park to life in Frontier Development's latest park management sim

HOW ELITE: DANGEROUS BUILT UP ITS ALIEN THREAT

→ THE ARRIVAL OF THE THARGOID WAS A LONG TIME COMING

FORMAT: **PC, XBOX ONE, PS4** | PUBLISHER: **FRONTIER DEVELOPMENTS** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | PLAYERS: **MMO**

Frontier Development's ambitious and incredibly immersive space sim has been growing and evolving ever since launch. It has not only found its home on PC as well as console, but has also ventured into the world of VR too. However, it's most engrossing addition over the last year or so has been the gradual introduction of a classic enemy from the halls of Elite's storied past; the Thargoid. These mysterious aliens have been teased for some time and as of September 2017, finally confirmed their presence in the world.

But the story of the Thargoid invasion has been a long time in the making with Frontier first teasing their existence and then leaving clues scattered through the Milky Way. It developed into something of an ARG for fans of the game as clues led to audio clips, led to maps and so on and so on. It's been a pretty incredibly journey for anyone following along, so here's a rundown of how events gradually unfolded.

AUG 2013

Michael Brookes, the executive producer on Elite: Dangerous, confirms in the comments of the Elite: Dangerous Kickstarter campaign that, "Thatgoids [sic] will be in the initial release, but we'll be doing something more substantial with them down the line."

MAY 2015

Unknown artefacts become items of great interest as players begin discovering them floating in space. The artefacts appear to emit an audio signal, which pilots around the galaxy begin the process of decoding, sharing their findings on forums and threads across the Internet.

JAN 2016

Commander Octo, while streaming the game live, discovers a "barnacle" whose features and presence are completely alien to their location. Merope 5C was the location of the find, some distance from the previously discovered artefacts.

IN BRIEF

Explore space, trade, fight and generally do as you wish on the final frontier of space exploration in this gigantic sim

JULY 2016

PC Gamer reports that probes are being discovered by pilots that hint heavily at the imminent arrival of an alien threat to the Milky Way. The probes, when scanned, emit an electromagnetic pulse, disabling any ships in their vicinity. This is followed by a noise. This sound, when run through a spectograph, appears to reveal a map of some kind. Players begin discussing First Contact protocols.

AUG 2016

A crash site is discovered with what appears to be a craft of unknown and peculiar design. Inspired by clues in a Gamescom livestream of the game by Frontier Developments, players go on a treasure hunt, leading to space stations, news reports, three riddle-giving commanders and, finally, a moon with a crashed ship.

JAN 2017

First contact is made. Commander DP Sayre, AKA Robert Bettig, is on a long-haul run to the Maia system with some colleagues when a warning appears on his HUD that the Hyperspace Conduit is unstable. His ship is pulled out of Witch-space (What Elite pilots call hyperspace), something that isn't supposed to be possible, all ship functions fail and DP Sayre is left floating in space. An NPC bounty hunter who was on his tail emerges and opens fire, but this is neither the biggest concern nor the source of the strange events as a massive, HR Giger-like vessel comes into view. It emits a bright yellow light and a cacophony of noise directed at DP Sayre's Corvette ship, turns – sending the Corvette spinning in its wake – and disappears. Systems are restored.

Three jumps later and it happens for a second time, this time allowing DP Sayre to give chase at the first opportunity and see where the strange ship goes. It appears to disappear into a vortex of some kind.

JUNE 2017

A second round of alien encounters begins as the scanning of the previously seen barnacles appears to attract the attention of the larger alien vessels. Ships are once again disabled with what appears to be an electromagnetic pulse before the alien craft itself becomes visible. It then approaches the surface of the planet or moon and appears to siphon off some kind of energy from the barnacle, in turn pulling in any free-standing vessels in the vicinity. Attempts to engage the ship in combat yield no responses.

Later some form of base, or perhaps just a landed vessel is discovered that can be entered and explored. It appears to be open to interaction, but with few clear-cut results.

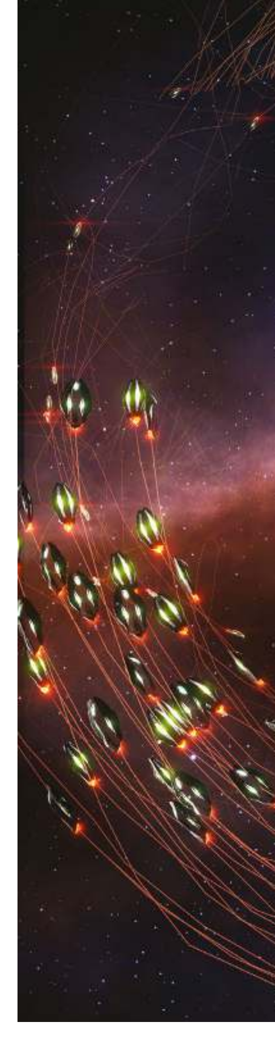
SEPT 2017

2.4 Update, The Return, is released with an expanded storyline for the Thargoids. Players begin encountering the alien's vessels, now surrounded by the wreckage of NPC ships and they launch attacks, sending out a swarm of smaller drones. The alien motherships appear invulnerable to attack. Samples taken from the ships show them to be organic, but also toxic, eating at ship hulls once taken on board.

OCT 2017

A team of pilots finally manages to take down a Thargoid vessel. The Smiling Dog Crew clan is the first to achieve this feat according to reports, the secret to taking on these enemies apparently being the use of a new anti-xeno missile system. Its multiple hearts need to be exposed and then attacked, depleting its ability to 'heal'. The first battle of this type takes about 20 minutes, although many others have been able to achieve this victory. Just remember if you're going to attempt it yourself to stay clear of any blast radius when the Thargoid craft is finally defeated.

However, within a matter of days the AX missiles prove vastly less effective, suggesting that the Thargoid are adapting to weapons and tactics as they are employed.

















DIRTY DEALS DON'T COME CHEAP IN SUB ROSA

→ AN AMBITIOUS NEW GAME PUSHING THROUGH EARLY ACCESS

FORMAT: **PC** | PUBLISHER: **DEVOLVER DIGITAL** | DEVELOPER: **CRYPTIC SEA** | PLAYERS: **TBC** | RELEASE: **2018**

Get some time under your belt with *Sub Rosa*, and you'll quickly get the sense that it's the sort of game that just wouldn't be possible without Early Access. It is, admittedly, rough around the edges, but it's *there*, a fantastic premise that is just waiting to further expanded and improved upon. At its most basic, *Sub Rosa* is a multiplayer first-person shooter looking to simulate a world run by corrupt corporate businesses, where you, a lowly agent, get caught up in the bloodshed.

Sub Rosa already has a dedicated fanbase behind it, a group intent on upholding the rules and spirit of the game to the best of their ability – even as it moves through a difficult period of early Alpha/ Early Access stability. Online games are, after all, only as good as the community that plays them. Play revolves around four core pillars: tense deals, insane double-crosses, dodgy deals and high-speed car chases. After enrolling with a company it's up to you to work with or against other players – be they part of the same corp or that of a rival – and start making some money; simple robberies to begin with, and later elaborate heists on office buildings or even going after the game's all important disks.

IN BRIEF
Sub Rosa is a multiplayer first-person shooter about double-crosses and digital currencies

The disks are at the heart of the *Sub Rosa* experience, colour-coded entities that will get you a sizeable reward upon delivery. It's here where the game can so often play on the fears or impatience of other players to great effect: sometimes the game will task you with trading disks and cash between rival corporations, and it only takes one player to derail the entire trade-off.

And believe us, once hell breaks loose in *Sub Rosa*, it's an all-or-nothing race for survival – anybody caught in the crossfire be damned. Presiding over a smooth business transaction may not be the most exciting of activities, but it's certainly the easiest way to earn riches, particularly so in *Sub Rosa* where the difficulty spikes can become fairly unwieldy for inexperienced players.

And yet, there's still a lot of love to be found in the base experience. *Sub Rosa* features a really interesting procedural physics system. Want to slide over the bonnet of a car like a badass when being chased during an acquisition gone wrong? Well you'll need to make sure you jump and position your legs in the right way and at the right angle, otherwise you'll find your body limply colliding with the steel chassis ruining your sense of momentum. *Sub Rosa* is filled with moments of strange curiosity and adrenaline-pumping action, all of it filtered through an experience that rewards emergent co-operative play and cautious attention to player behaviour. There's still a lot of work to be done, but there's something special here just waiting to be realised.



Above: While the community does its best to keep the lobbies in check, there isn't enough of a punishment for those eager to simply grief each and every player they encounter. This will need to be addressed before it comes out of Early Access.





Left: Cryptic Sea has brought on Brendon Chung to work on the game, the creator of such innovative works as *Thirty Flights Of Loving* and *Quadrilateral Cowboy*.



WHY I ❤...

DAYZ

JOE NEATE, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, RARE.

I only ever played this game once, but that was enough. About five years ago I started playing DayZ *after reading about it. I remember reading all of these stories and going 'I need to play this game'; Because these players had been given this world, this freedom, and they decided to do whatever felt right for them. [The stories] were so compelling that it just pulled me into the game. So I managed to download the mod, get it applied and all that – I'm not very tech savvy, that's why I'm a producer – and I managed to play for about six hours.*

I remember encountering a few people who didn't kill me… but eventually I triggered a bunch of zombies who started to chase me, and I was like 'oh shit'. So I ran up this church spire, all the way to the top; [the zombies] got stuck on the stairs because their path finding wasn't very good, and, after about an hour or so of being up in this church, I had managed to fight my way back down to the bottom. It was such a relief, but then as I came to the door I could see this thing off in the distance… 'What is that?' I thought, but just when I realised that it was a guy lying down with a rifle aiming at me, I heard this click and then it was like 'you died' and I was like 'fucking hell'. But for me that was enough.

I got this amazing, memorable story out it. I knew that permadeath might not be right for me, whether I wanted to start all over again and everything else, but it's a game that has such memorable stories from player encounters – it was a massive inspiration for what Sea Of Thieves *would eventually become. That type of game has stuck with me ever since I played* DayZ*, ever since I read about it. I think it is, honestly, the one game that has inspired me the most in my career recently, because of the power of those player-created stories.*



> "It was a massive inspiration for what Sea Of Thieves would eventually become"
>
> **JOE NEATE, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, RARE**


Sea of Thieves®



A PIRATES LIFE FOR US

WITH SEA OF THIEVES RARE IS MAKING AN INCREDIBLE RETURN TO THE TRIPLE-A GAMING SPACE. WE FIND OUT FROM THE DEVELOPMENT TEAM HOW ITS FULFILLING THE POTENTIAL OF XBOX ONE AND LIVING UP TO ITS OWN STORIED LEGACY





"To have the chance to work on a game like this that quintessentially feels like a Rare game, that's the interesting thing about it." So says design director Mike Chapman as we catch up with the Rare team to talk about the wonderfully idiosyncratic and enthralling *Sea Of Thieves*. This is a game that's been billed as a great many things: a pirate simulator (not far off), Rare given free rein after years of Kinect-based subjugation (more on how inaccurate that is later), and a shared-world adventure fantasy (closer to the mark). But we would call it Rare being itself. A different self, perhaps. A more modern and technologically driven self, but isn't there something about a pirate game from the Twycross studio that just feels *right*?

"I think if you look back at all the Rare games, Rare has always had an affinity with pirates," says Chapman. "It's an opportunity to wrap it in a beautiful art style and a pirate fantasy. But we had vampires, zombies, we had deep sea salvage, we had dinosaurs and every kind of thing you could imagine, but pirates always felt right because when you think of a team of friends working together on an adventure on a ship together, I don't think there's a better expression of co-op."

Apparently Rare had a wall in its office with all sorts of concepts as the mission to make a player-driven co-operative experience took hold. Many were whispering under their breaths that it had to be pirates, but co-op was always the paramount concern, with opportunities to meet and interact with other players. From that emerged the idea of an open and emergent sandbox of tools and mechanics that would allow for myriad gameplay opportunities. It sounds as if the more freeform the team made the core of this project, the more obvious it became that the vagabound lifestyle of seafaring adventurers was the perfect fit.

But there's inherent risk in launching a new IP and as we've seen from the story of Lionhead and the way it was eaten by its own attempts at an online co-operative experience with *Fable Legends*, it's not without its risks. After years of supporting the Xbox platforms with first party, family-friendly titles, *Sea Of Thieves* feels like a significant shift in direction and Rare had an interesting way of convincing its bosses this was the right way to go.

"We kind of didn't tell Phil Spencer what we were working on," admits executive producer Joe Neate. Instead Rare began prototyping its concept, getting the base mechanics in place without art assets. Then the Xbox executive came to visit for a pitch of the concept and Rare had a plan in place to wow them. "They came across; Phil Spencer came across, Kudo Tsunoda who was part of Phil's [Microsoft Studios] Org at that time, and some others," Neate continues. "We kind of pitched them the vision for this game, a pirate adventure, a co-operative and shared world, etc. 'It's a SWAG, a shared world adventure game' (best acronym ever!). And they were like, 'Cool that sounds good. I think we're interested'. And we said; 'Now you're going to play it'. They were completely surprised in this approach, but we had such confidence that even though this was not a beautiful game that we could put it in front of high-level execs and the experience would be the sum of so much. You play it and you get it."

Even today, there's an element of *Sea Of Thieves* that requires first-hand experience to really appreciate it. We were interested in this game – we would be interested in any Rare game – but it was only after playing *Sea Of Thieves* that we became captivated by it. We could see appreciating it as a solo player, but sharing the responsibility of sailing a ship across the ocean is another thing entirely. Sharing the experience, whether with those immediately in the game with you or by recording and posting it online, was at the heart of what Rare was hoping to achieve.

"We also recorded them playing the game and we didn't tell them we were doing this," explains Neate, continuing a pitch story that's filled with a level of deception and trickery to make any pirate proud. "We had little cams and we had microphones and we then put together a video, which we sent across to them about a week later with their adventures going, 'this is the first shared story of *Sea Of Thieves*,' and that was us paying off the watchable, shareable nature of the game, which we were always really keen on from the start. We identified that this shared world where players are given their own tools, their own goals, it leads to really interesting, watchable stories. From that point on it was like we and Xbox were all in on this title."

"We kind of didn't tell Phil Spencer what we were working on"

For Chapman, the drive to make this game a reality tied in with the feelings evoked by a classic childhood movie. "When you think of parallels to *The Goonies* – which I love – it's a group of friends having an adventure together and you don't know what things you're going to face along the way. It's such an easy thing to get passionate about."

But as much as a gorgeously realised pirate fantasy world seems right up Rare's street, making a service game – something that needs to live and expand long after release – is completely foreign to the famous developer and that meant some significant changes. "We've probably spent about two and a half years since [the pitch] and a lot of the process has been changing the culture of the studio, really interestingly going from a game that's a single release where you all work on the game for however long, you stop adding new stuff six months before the end and then you just fix all of the bugs and get it performing and all that stuff," Neate tells us. "We spent a lot of time investing in that technology, investing in the back-end, building up our server tech. It's a very different game than we've made before at Rare and we're now in the position where adding features and adding stuff, and growing and growing that experience is a lot smoother and a lot simpler than it was two years ago."

Hearing all of this, as fantastic as it sounds as a commitment to the team's vision, we can't help but have the recent closure of Lionhead in mind when we hear about a studio overhauling its processes and structure to support a new kind of experience. Like *Sea Of Thieves*, anyone who played *Fable Legends* walked away impressed with the technology and gameplay potential, but it ended up killing the studio; it became unfit for any other purpose. But while those concerns may creep into our minds, Rare is keen to make clear that the heart of the team hasn't changed. "The studio has this awesome mix of people who have been there since the start, truly the start," insists Chapman. "Greg Mayles is the creative director who worked on *Donkey Kong Country* and *Banjo* and all of these great games, and we get to work with people like that every day. But also new people have come to Rare because that's the kind of game that they want to make. That's the kind of game that they're inspired by and to them Rare is this creative beacon that they want to come and work for." »



■ Sword combat, as it's currently implemented, allows for heavy and light attacks and blocking, but Rare has indicated that it will be looking to add more depth to its melee combat ahead of release and likely post-release as well.



■ Other players and skeleton crews on islands are not the only threats in this world. Sharks are formidable enemies for you to deal with, and they particularly like hanging out around shipwrecks.

THINGS TO DO IN SEA OF THIEVES

A QUICK GUIDE TO THE GAME'S CURRENT ACTIVITIES



Combat

See another player ship off in the distance? Well, now you have a choice. Maybe they saw you, maybe they didn't, but whether you choose to engage or not is up to you. They might have treasure on its way to an outpost for cashing in and you could pinch it right off them. Then again they may be locked and loaded ready to take your hard-fought bounty. Either way a confrontation may be exactly what you've been looking for anyway; a test for your stalwart crew and your seaworthiness.

Exploration

The real joy of any sandbox experience like this is simply being able to pick a point on the map, set your compasses on it and venture out into the unknown. While there will always be objectives for you to complete, sometimes you'll find that the best experiences will emerge from either heading out with no specific objective in mind, or at least with an openness to change your mind as new points of interest emerge around you.

Treasure Maps

Surely the primary concern for any committed traveller on the high seas is the plundering of booty, hidden by those who came before you. Treasure maps in the game are classic 'X marks the spot' affairs, but with only environmental signposting and no name for the islands on the treasure map you'll need to find the right location in the vast ocean and then find the spot using your wits and pirate instincts – plus a compass and a big world map.

Shipwrecks

While you're keeping your eye on the horizon be sure to pay attention to flocks of gulls circling around a point in the middle of the sea, because there you'll find a shipwreck and all sorts of treasures within. The only way to access a shipwreck that we've seen is to dive into the ocean and swim in, but these skeletons of former vessels attract more than just birds to them; you'll need to keep an eye out for sharks too. Inside you'll find at least one treasure chest along with barrels full of useful resources like cannonballs, planks and bananas.

Drinking

You'll need at least a little gold to spend your evenings in the tavern drinking grog all night, but once you have a little coin there's nothing to stop you. You can drink yourself stupid, play some tunes on your instrument of choice, exchange insults with your party or any salty seadogs who might be passing through, and then collapse in a heap on your way back to your ship. Drunk and disorderly behaviour is practically encouraged in the pirate code. And you can always force your lowliest crew member to clean up the sick.

Riddle Maps

A variation on the treasure map style, these riddles offer no visual clues as to where you should head, but will likely name the island on which your prize is hidden and offer rhyming clues that will lead you to its location. You'll need to complete one clue at a time in order to reveal the next one, with the third being the final clue in the cases that we've seen.

THE FERRY OF THE DAMNED

THE STORY BEHIND SEA OF THIEVES' DEATH MECHANIC

If you should be so unfortunate as to expire on one of your pirate adventures in *Sea Of Thieves*, you should not be too concerned. You see, if you get taken out by another crew or a skeleton warrior shoots you from ten paces you'll emerge on the Ferry of the Damned. This ghost ship is a kind of purgatory where you'll have to wait before being allowed back into the game. However, it's also a little bit more than that.

"It came from *Beetlejuice* basically. You know the waiting room for dead people in *Beetlejuice* where you get the ticket and you have to kind of wait before you can get back," executive producer Joe Neate reveals. "We actually wanted it to be a kind of a lobby for dead people. We wanted to make death part of the adventure and part of the flow and part of the fun. The aspiration was very much that any other players that are in your world that die at the same time, you'll be put on to that ghost ship together and you don't have any weapons when you're there so there's no incentive to fight. What we wanted to do is switch it up a bit and see people actually making friends with other people in the world, sharing their stories of what has happened."

It's a very cool idea, getting to see friends and enemies mingle and commiserate with one another before heading back into the fray. Plus the ship itself is wonderfully realised. We had to ask if Rare might perhaps have even bigger plans for this spooky vessel. "At the moment it's great as a consequence of loss and of death, but also there's an added bonus of potentially making new friends, which is actually something that we really want to encourage in *Sea Of Thieves* – that social bond and growing your friends list on Xbox Live is a goal for us. It's a metric we track as part of the studio. When we look at 'Can we do more on the ghost ship?', definitely we can. And we've got a lot of ideas around it."



"Rare is this creative beacon that they want to come and work for"

And it's not as if Rare's recent history has been on one solid, direct path from *Donkey Kong Country* to here. More recent output has been focused around Kinect on Xbox 360 and Xbox One and while there may be a perception that this was a distraction from Rare's true passions, Chapman believes these were great examples of the studio's classic approach to games. "For me as a creative working on those games, they are the most creative games to make even though you're basically making a sport where people understand the rule set and trying to move it to an input device, that is hard work, very challenging, very fulfilling work. Even though it might seem like we're just doing the same thing, each one was a challenge, so for me that was it was still extremely rewarding work to work on Kinect."

And you shouldn't underestimate the influence all of those years developing for motion controls has had on Rare's approach to intuitive game design. "I think if things function the way you expect, you're off to a winner already," says Chapman. "It's so fun when you come to [trade] shows and people put the water in the bucket and we've seen a few times people bail it and just throw it away and the water is going back in the hull." We saw this a few times ourselves. As your ship takes damage in *Sea Of Thieves* holes will appear in the hull and, if they're below the waterline, you'll start taking on water. In these instances you need to select the bucket from your inventory, fill it up and throw the water over the side. But experience of other titles has given some players bad habits. "Other games have taught them that it's an abstracted mechanic and they're like, 'What do I do with the water?' And my response – and I feel really bad every time I say it – is, 'Well, what would you do in real life?'." Which is where the Kinect experience of making controls feel logical, is paying off. "You could draw parallels there, in that if you make it intuitive, make it believable, not realistic, I think that's where we want to use that creative license and push in any direction. So long as it's believable. Sails can be angled into the wind and the more they're billowed the faster you go. You don't need to explain these things. People learn it and we've always seen that."



■ We've yet to see any kraken attacks in any sessions we've witnessed, but images such as this would suggest that they're yet another threat we can expect out in the deep.

It's something that has fed into the co-operative nature of the game too. Something as simple as being able to turn around and hold up your treasure map for your comrades to come and take a look at was part of that process of treating objects with real-world, tactile reasoning. "That's a mechanic that was there really early," Chapman reveals to us. "When we were building that core co-operative component of the game, where it was four players, on a ship together, how do we balance mechanics so it's better to have four players? When we're co-operatively treasure hunting together what mechanics do we need to make that moment feel intimate and special and that we feel like we're on this adventure together?"

Being able to flip the map around is a pretty small example of the ways the game forces a division of labour between the crew. You can't hold a map, compass, lantern and sword all at the same time, so it takes a crew, working and talking together, to navigate an island and find hidden treasure. Things only become more demanding on the ship where steering at full sail obscures your view from the wheel so you'll want someone to navigate from the bow or crow's nest. You'll also want at least one person on the sails, angling them into the wind for speed. And perhaps another player loading the cannons and making repairs as needed. That, or they could serenade you with some shanties from their concertina, fiddle or hurdy-gurdy.

"That division of roles on the ship is a big part of it," Chapman explains. "We often get the question, 'How many classes are there and what are they?'. It's like, 'There aren't any'. If the game's going to be endlessly surprising and exciting you need the freedom to do anything in the game. You are not always the cannon guy. You're not always the repair guy. One moment you're on the wheel, the next minute you take damage and you grab a plank and you go and repair. If players can react in endless ways, that's what will keep the game exciting."

Adding to that variety are the various structures the game will offer for adventuring. Only a few of these are currently confirmed or playable in *Sea Of Thieves*' ongoing Insider Program alpha test, but they're already showing fantastic promise.

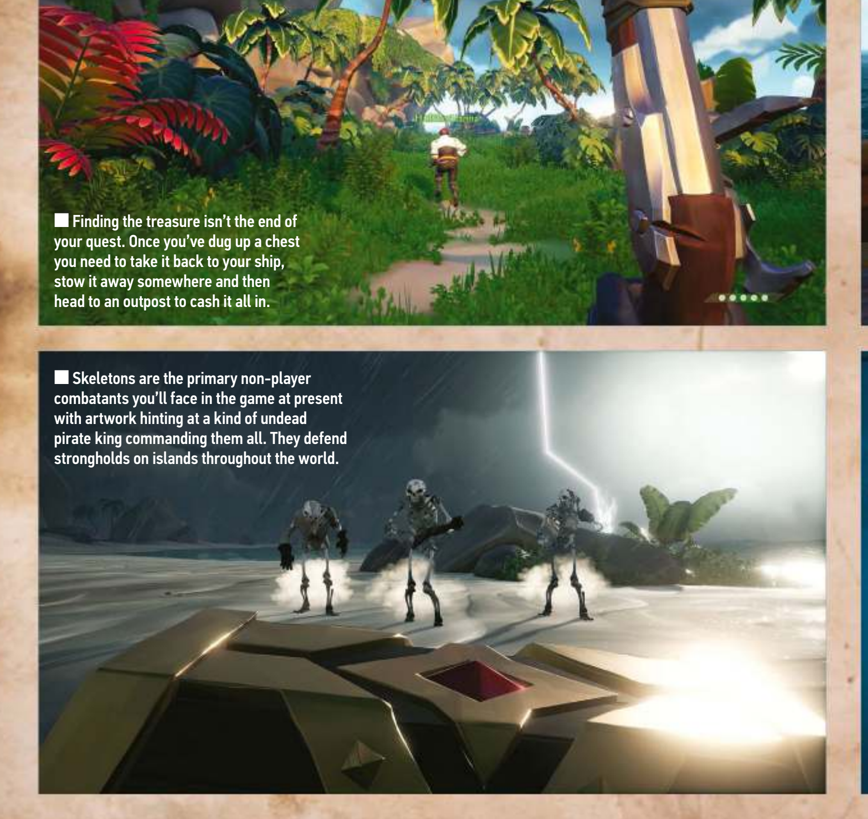
"At the moment you're just given the 'X marks the spot' or the riddle maps, kind of grandly, at the start of the session, but ultimately our progression systems that we've got a big group of the studio working on right now, [they're] perfectly suited to a pirate game because of the tone and the theme of it," Neate tells us. "We're not quite ready to talk about exactly what that is yet because we want to show and tell, but there will be a variety of different quests to undertake that meet different player motivations and you'll be rewarded for playing in the kind of way that you want. So if you want to be the kind of player who steals chests from other players, takes them back and gets rewarded in that way then the kind of rewards you're going to get are going to be very much reflective of the way you play; the way that you appear in the world, the kind of things you can wear. Even the items you hold and stuff. If you just want to go out and treasure hunt or you want to be the more social kind of pirate, all of those things will be rewarded by the game."

As it stands *Sea Of Thieves* remains an evolving project; one that will likely continue to grow and change to meet player demands once it's live and playable for all. For its Insider Program, testing so far it has kept the game rather limited in terms of variety, instead looking to track and balance some more fundamental questions about how you will experience the game. »

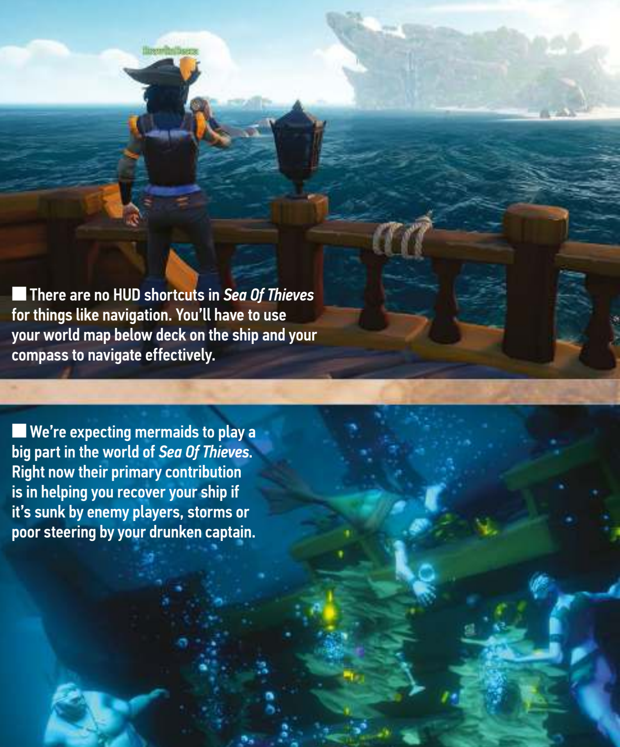
Sea combat is really spectacular to witness and be involved with. The water is so well realised that every wave and bump can play a part in your aim and getting a hit feels amazing.

Finding the treasure isn't the end of your quest. Once you've dug up a chest you need to take it back to your ship, stow it away somewhere and then head to an outpost to cash it all in.

There are no HUD shortcuts in *Sea Of Thieves* for things like navigation. You'll have to use your world map below deck on the ship and your compass to navigate effectively.



Skeletons are the primary non-player combatants you'll face in the game at present with artwork hinting at a kind of undead pirate king commanding them all. They defend strongholds on islands throughout the world.



We're expecting mermaids to play a big part in the world of *Sea Of Thieves*. Right now their primary contribution is in helping you recover your ship if it's sunk by enemy players, storms or poor steering by your drunken captain.

"The big focus for us in the technical alpha was how often should you see another ship?" Chapman tells us. "The game doesn't have fast travel. It's deliberately made so you've got a ship and you point it towards the horizon, you sail over there, but how often should you see other people?" As it happened the early tests suggested these sightings weren't happening enough for Rare's liking. "What we found was that was happening every 45 minutes to an hour, which felt too long," continues Chapman. "When I say that, I don't mean it has to be ship combat, but the chance of seeing a ship. Because, just seeing a sail on the distant horizon is a magical moment, even if it doesn't lead anywhere."

"You want it to feel like every pirate movie you've ever seen or TV show, where that moment where you see the set of sails you get the spyglass out and you look at who it is and what they're doing; you make the decision whether you want to go and engage with them or not," adds Neate. "Maybe they surprise you when you're exploring an island and maybe you should have left someone on the boat. We've worked really hard on some super-cool technology to ensure that that is the case."

Now *Sea Of Thieves* will bring you into sight of other crews with a little more frequency, offering that opportunity to engage, violently or not, with other players in the world. "We felt that we wanted to bring that time down, so we pushed the visibility, we increased the visibility of the lanterns on the ship at night," Chapman picks up. "So, when you have your lanterns on you can see a ship at distance. You have that risk-reward of do we want to see more or do we want to turn off our light and play a bit more stealthily. Now we ran that through and that's coming out at every 30 minutes on average, which feels right for us in the sense that you've got enough time to come into the world, bond with a crew, make a bit of progress and then you're going to see a ship. But it's still unpredictable in the sense that when you see that ship you might have treasure on board, you might have only just about got going because you messed about a bit, you might just be exploring. It's still going to feel unpredictable."



Don't overdo the grog if you can help it as drinking too much will make you very sick indeed. That being said, catching your sick in a bucket and throwing it at someone else will obscure their vision for a few minutes. Maybe not a bad combat tactic in a pinch.

> *"The big focus for us in the technical alpha was how often should you see another ship?"*

This begs the question, how is something like this managed? The subject of server structure and management isn't really something we've given much thought to before for *Sea Of Thieves*, but with this vaguely curated element to player management being implemented it's clear *Sea Of Thieves* isn't a completely open, fully-populated single server. Nor is it completely isolated or locally managed. Neate didn't want to get into too many specifics, but had a few things he could reveal. "We haven't talked about and that's on purpose," he tells us, seeing some disappointment from us that he can't say more. "We discussed this quite a bit, about whether we talk about the details of it or how we do it or not. The vision behind it is what's important, which will answer your question I think. It's that ultimately it's kind of a co-op adventure game of you and a group of players on a ship in this world, out on your own adventures, whatever it is you're seeking to do, but there's always the right amount of frequency of player encounters, with other crews on their adventures in a world." At this point games like *No Man's Sky* spring to mind, but the online structure Rare seems to have planned might be better compared to Microsoft cabin mate *Minecraft*. And one of Rare's big influences for the way in which it wants to offer a loose structure for players to play within might reveal even more.

"If I look at a game like *EVE Online*, it's amazing," Neate declares. "Everybody knows who the famous players are and that's not necessarily game mechanics recognising it. It's the game community recognising it. It's videos and stories." Now the team is looking at ways to help bolster and enrich those stories with rewards that help players build up their legend within the game, through clothing and special items that will help to identify them as great adventurers. "I think now we've put the legends stuff in, we'll see how it plays and see what are players asking for," Neate continues. "Are they asking for a system that allows them to put out bounties versus actually just going and finding out as they play or from who they're playing with? Just doing it and finding it themselves, filming it and putting it online and then we as a team will reward that and reflect it whether it's in a pirate newspaper or whatever it is."

In this way, much more like *EVE*, we as players, and our approach to *Sea Of Thieves*, become the narrative of the game. "There's no Blackbeard in our game. There's no Black Pearl," Neate summarises. "All of those things will come from player achievement and player stories and shared videos and all of these different things that you're going to be able to do in the game."

So for now the main way of showing off your progress in *Sea Of Thieves* will be through customisation and loot. "Ultimately players are on this journey to become a pirate legend and you build your reputation in multiple quest styles and through that the way you look will reflect the things that you've done in the game," Chapman explains. "I think that's a really powerful thing for this game. The idea that it's not about stats. It's not about numbers. It's the social currency of me seeing you dressed in a really cool way and me having that conversation of 'Where did you get that stuff from?', 'Well, I've been doing quests for these guys', or 'I've been doing these things in the world'. You bring your maps to our session and we'll share in it." Some of that is still to be finalised in the game, but it could be the key according to Neate. "Adding that missing piece of progression on there is really what's going to make this game sing and really makes the game feel complete. We've got a lot of cool stuff in the studio that we've already been toggling on and testing internally and we're going to be testing in our alpha fairly soon. It's exciting times. We're onto something super-special." »



Storms are just as threatening as anything else out in the world. The waves become bigger, steering becomes much more difficult and lightning strikes can do as much damage as any enemy ship could hope to inflict.

"It's kind of like we're the sequel of our own game that hasn't been released yet"

One fairly obvious addition will be customising your ships. "As we go and evolve the game, that's when the concept of ship ownership and ship progression and customisation comes in," Neate reveals. "We've already shown different-looking ships in the alpha to tease what players are going to be able to do in the future, whether it's the figurehead or the sails and the body of the ship. The personal thing is cool, but it's also super-cool when you see that ship on the horizon and you think, 'Oh, shit. It's those guys!'."

What all of this means, when we get down to the nitty-gritty of it, is that Rare is going to be relying heavily on a community ethos and mentality to emerge around *Sea Of Thieves*. In order for the game to be fun and engaging and as shareable as it wants, it also needs to find ways of cultivating an atmosphere of risk and reward that will offer as much incentive to be friendly as it does to be terrible. Both have their attraction and both should lead to a lot of fun possibilities in the game. "People should play it in the right spirit and our community should remain positive and welcoming and all of those things," Neate says. "We're always going to be looking at our vision through that kind of lens and taking feedback that helps keep it in the right direction. It's a fun balancing act. The reason we've been doing our alpha since last December is to practice that. How do we take feedback? How do we react to it? How do we communicate it? All of those things, you have to learn it as a team. It's like the culture change I talked about earlier, all of that stuff is super important and building a positive, welcoming community for a game that doesn't yet exist – it's a new IP, it's not out yet – was a real tactic as part of that."

So, in many ways, the Insider Program is not only a training tool for Rare to learn about managing an ongoing, living, breathing game, but also a way of creating an army of seaworthy evangelists for the game when it finally launches. A strong group of players will be well versed in the best ways to enjoy and appreciate *Sea Of Thieves* and will be ready to educate anyone they might meet on the waves. "By the time we do hit launch and we bring in that broadest audience, there's already a bunch of players playing it, there's a Wiki page and a Reddit with tens of thousands of people talking about it," adds Neate. "There are tutorial videos on YouTube. There are people going 'Hey, I'll help new players'. All of that kind of stuff has to build up and rather than rolling the dice as to whether it will, we've already got it. It's kind of like we're the sequel of our own game that hasn't been released yet. I think that's a really strong opportunity and position to be in."

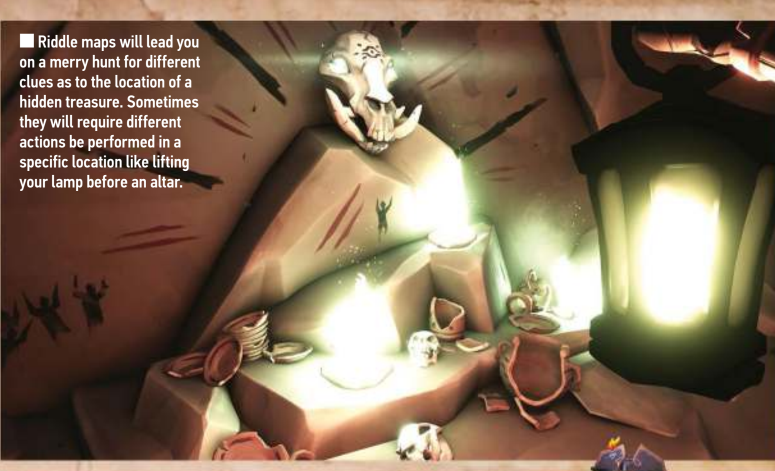
And as we've said, playing *Sea Of Thieves* is really the only way to fully appreciate the full spectacle and glory of it. The sheer fun of running around a ship, the immediacy of the tasks at hand, how useful you can be to a team regardless of your skill with a gun or sword, the intuitive nature of every instrument and tool. But if that's really the case, if it needs to be in the hands of players for anyone to truly appreciate it, we wondered if Rare might consider taking advantage of Xbox's Game Preview program ahead of launch to reach an even larger audience. "We definitely considered Game Preview or Early Access, but our Insider Program is basically our version of Early Access, because we're Rare and ultimately we're a part of Xbox and games go into Early Access to kind of get the funds to finish their game," is Neate's reasoning. "But there are loads of great benefits alongside that of working with your players to build the game they want. Taking their feedback, building a community. We definitely looked at Early Access and went 'What are the cool things about Early Access that we'd like to do, but what's the way that's right for us to do it as a first party studio?'. That's our insider program."

And there's good news for anyone wanting to sign up and check the game out. "Anybody that's signed up for our insider program will get a chance to play the alpha before the game is released, so that's our commitment to players," Neate affirms. "And they're all going to get exclusive rewards that transfer across to the game as well." So, hopefully you're already on the list to stand the best chance of getting involved. We really don't think you'll regret it.

For all that *Sea Of Thieves* is pushing in new directions, testing this studio's creative powers and testing its vision with each new alpha test, there is something so purely Rare about it. It's not just the humour or the art style. It's something at the core of the experience. The joy of it. The simplicity of it. "I think Rare games are about doing new and exciting things, but not taking themselves too seriously," Chapman reflects. "Building these vibrant characters and these vibrant worlds where you just want to get lost in them and play. That's fundamentally what a Rare game is all about. It's about truly playing and losing yourself in these experiences. You're going to have a laugh each time. Every game feels like a special occasion. I think that's what Rare is all about and that's what we're passionate about."



There are at least three instruments in the game that your avatar will know how to play. If a bunch of you play together the music seems to sync into a wonderful harmonised performance.



Riddle maps will lead you on a merry hunt for different clues as to the location of a hidden treasure. Sometimes they will require different actions be performed in a specific location like lifting your lamp before an altar.

THE WHEEL OF EMOTION

HOW RARE WAS INSPIRED BY THE LINKS BETWEEN FEELINGS

As we discussed the making of *Sea Of Thieves* with design director Mike Chapman he brought up the concept of the wheel of emotion, as developed by Dr. Robert Plutchik. "You've got the opposites of the wheel of emotion – of disgust or happiness or sadness or apprehension, all of these emotions – and whenever we designed features we wanted to hit multiple emotions," he tells us. "We would always gather around this wheel and people would put up their stories and flag them against the emotions. It was like, 'I lost my ship and I felt sadness, but as the ship sank below the waves there was a sunset behind it and I felt awe'. As long as the mechanics were evenly spread across that entire wheel then we knew we were on to a winner."

It's a fascinating idea, using this broader view of human emotion and deliberately looking to hit upon as many different feelings to give *Sea Of Thieves* the broadest range of reactions and experiences. For every frustration there can also be elation. So we thought we would recreate the wheel for you to look at yourselves to see the kinds of duality of emotion the game will be looking to evoke.









BEST BRITISH DEVELOPERS

The UK games industry is fighting back. After a difficult couple of years, a time in which we've seen many of the country's most legendary studios shutting their doors for good, it feels as if it is finally regaining its stability. UKIE estimates that there are now 2,175 active game companies in the UK, and while that's far too many for us to cover we have decided to shine the spotlight on some with titles in active production. These are the game companies putting the UK back on the map; striving for innovation with passion, ambitious and diligence.

RARE

Founded: 1985 • Location: Twycross

FAMOUS FOR
Donkey Kong Country, GoldenEye 007, Viva Piñata

WHAT'S NEXT
Sea Of Thieves [2018]

Widely recognised as one of the most creative studios to ever emerge out the United Kingdom, Rare has been innovating play and delighting players for over 30 years. The iconic golden Rareware logo became synonymous with quality, something the company earned as it entered into a prolific partnership with Nintendo between 1994 and 2002. Its staff would go on to unleash genre-redefining titles such as *GoldenEye 007* whilst giving characters like Star Fox and Donkey Kong a new lease on life. The developers of Rare have been risk takers; becoming part of the Microsoft family in 2002, purchased for 375 million dollars, was the perfect embodiment of this spirit. From the outside looking in, it wasn't a move that necessarily made total sense, and while the company became less pronounced – working behind the scenes to further improve the technology and software driving the Xbox experience – it was still able to surface for air long enough to deliver a legitimate modern classic in *Viva Piñata*. Rare is coming back to the forefront of British development in 2018 with *Sea Of Thieves*, a game that could indeed change the way we perceive and play co-operatively driven videogames – put we don't need to tell you that here, turn to page 32 and read about it for yourself in our cover feature.



"Rare is a really special studio, that has been around for over 30 years, but cannot be pinned down to one genre or singular type of game. What makes it so special is how it has evolved as a studio throughout its history, always looking at what could be the next big thing, what new exciting challenges this would bring to the team, and how to continually improve its culture to meet them.

At the start of *Sea Of Thieves*, we had a completely blank slate to come up with what was the next game for a studio as special as this one, which is a pretty rare (pun intended) opportunity and one that we really wanted to make sure we took with both hands. We looked at the emerging trend of shared-world games, at developers building their games with their community, and at games that were really fun to watch or read about due to the variety of player stories emerging from them, and combined elements of all of these into an idea for 'players creating stories together', and eventually a shared world pirate game where you can throw sick at each other.

To achieve this, we had to look at our culture and how we could evolve to meet the challenges that a completely new type of game throws up (intentional pun number two).

What makes Rare so special is that our culture relies on everyone taking ownership of these challenges, always thinking of new ways we can work to meet them, and being given the freedom to go and try their ideas. With this in mind, we have embraced a completely new way of working, with our focus on continuous delivery, not building up technical debt, shipping every week to players, and taking customer feedback into the heart of our decision making. The team has worked super hard to make this a success, and we're now in a position to capitalise on this as we near the launch of *Sea Of Thieves*. Here's to the next 30 years!"

JOE NEATE,
Executive Producer, Rare

CREATIVE ASSEMBLY

Founded: 1987 • Location: Horsham

FAMOUS FOR
Rome: Total War, Alien: Isolation, Halo Wars 2

WHAT'S NEXT
Total War: Arena, Total War Battles: Kingdom



> "Creativity and quality are at the heart of Creative Assembly. We are dedicated to maintaining our heritage of crafting the greatest games experiences, with a collaborative approach, keeping our output fresh and taking great pride in nurturing our growing team of world-class, diverse and multinational talent"
>
> **TIM HEATON,**
> **Studio Director, Creative Assembly**

It's difficult to argue with the assertion that Creative Assembly has established itself as one of the biggest forces in the games industry, a true leader that emerged out of the United Kingdom through 30 years of success, innovation and excellence. Humble origins, in which the outfit focused on porting games from the Amiga and ZX Spectrum platforms to MS-DOS, quickly gave way to greater ambitions. Creative Assembly improved its expertise by working with EA on a number of sports titles throughout the Nineties before taking a major risk on its first original IP: *Shogun: Total War.* Creative Assembly is now the leading strategy game developer across PC and console – and it has demonstrated a keen eye for developing first and third-person action games in *Alien: Isolation* and *Viking: Battle For Asgard.* With over 500 creative minds employed by the studio – a figure that has ballooned since the Sega acquisition in 2004 – it is now a powerful and agile development machine; eight projects are currently in development, four of which are unannounced. Creative Assembly has come a long way in 30 years, and it certainly shows no signs of slowing down.



PLAYGROUND GAMES

Founded: 2010 • Location: Leamington

FAMOUS FOR
Forza Horizon

WHAT'S NEXT
TBC

There is nothing but open road in front of Playground Games. After Microsoft's Project Gotham Racing franchise was put on hold in 2007, there was a gap in the Xbox line-up for a fun as all hell arcade racer – enter Playground Games with Forza Horizon. The studio formed in 2010 by veterans of the industry; collectively they have delivered frequently progressive, always stunning, critically-acclaimed videogames. While Forza Motorsport struggled to introduce real change, Horizon has always pushed for more; open world racing, dynamic weather and damage systems, and game modes that push for having the maximum amount of fun behind the wheel as humanly possible. Playground expanded this year, increasing its numbers to 115 employees and opened up a second office – this one for an all-new, non-racing, focused videogame. We don't know what it is, but rest assured that 2018 is going to be a huge year for the studio.

ROCKSTEADY STUDIOS

Founded: 2004 • Location: London

FAMOUS FOR
Batman: Arkham Asylum, Batman: Arkham City

WHAT'S NEXT
TBC

Where would we be without Rocksteady? In 2009 the studio unleashed *Batman: Arkham Asylum* – changing our entire perception of licensed games in the process. The game's success led to Time Warner acquiring the British outfit in 2010, with the scope and ambition of each of its subsequent releases expanding wildly. Rocksteady has established itself as one of the best in the industry, boasting an employee roster of over 148 in-house staffers. 2015's *Arkham Knight* and 2016's *Arkham VR* signalled a beautiful end to the studio's reign in Gotham, with the latter acting as a shining benchmark to potential of 3D virtual reality spaces in videogames. Rocksteady isn't quite ready to announce its next project, though the studio is confident that it is going to cause people to "lose their minds," as marketing manager Gaz Deaves would put it – one thing *is* for certain, the whole world is watching with baited breath.



FRONTIER DEVELOPMENTS

Founded: 1994 • Location: Cambridge

FAMOUS FOR
Frontier: First Encounters, Rollercoaster Tycoon 3, Elite: Dangerous

WHAT'S NEXT
Jurassic World Evolution

Ever since Frontier was founded in 1994, the studio has sought to create games and technology that pushes both itself and the entire UK games scene to the forefront of the industry. Founded by David Braben, the legendary British creator looked to follow up his work on seminal space game *Elite*, with the team at Frontier coming together to continue to break down the boundaries between imagination and play. Over the decades, Frontier has put a diverse library of games to its name; licensed titles to theme park sims, fun platformers and, of course, the ever-ambitious sequels to the game that started it all for Braben. *Elite: Dangerous* represents something of a fresh challenge, with Frontier working to maintain a live game service, to continue to engage and surprise players. With the Thargoids introduced this year, we get the sense that Frontier's most exciting days are still in front of it.

> After two decades working with some of the industry's biggest names, we've worked hard at Frontier to become a fully independent developer and publisher of our own titles. Today, we're focused on innovation and quality in our own games, and our Cambridge studio is growing by the day thanks to the work of our world-class team and the support of a truly incredible community of players

JONNY WATTS,
Chief Creative Officer, Frontier Games

TEAM17

Founded: 1990 • Location: Wakefield

FAMOUS FOR
Worms, The Escapists, Overcooked

WHAT'S NEXT
Yoku's Island Express, My Time at Portia

It might have spent many years known as the company responsible for Worms – and basically just Worms, forever Worms – but Team17 has completely overhauled itself, making it something of a powerhouse; a kingmaker of sorts for the independent UK development community. It is, in fact, largely considered to be the longest surviving independent developer in the world – its CEO, Debbie Bestwick recently received an MBE for her services to the British games industry in the Queen's Birthday Honours list. A passionate group of developers has formed around her at the company, and Team17 now puts its immeasurable passion and power into ensuring that other studios can get their good work off of the ground and into the hands of consumers. In 2016 the studio acquired Mouldy Toof, the studio behind *The Escapists* in an effort to expand further, while its work pushing the likes of *Yooka-Layle* and *Overcooked* has been met with great success. If any one thing is for certain it's this: the entire industry – globally, not just locally – would be worse off were it not for Team17.

> I've been at Team17 since the beginning of 2011. What I love most about working here is the people – both internally and our external games label partners. There's such an ace mixture of colleagues who have been with the company for 20-plus years to fresh new talent coming through the doors. We may be larger than ever and recruiting, but it still very much feels like we're a family

BETHANY ASTON,
PR & Events manager, Team17





TT GAMES

Founded: 2005 • Location: Knutsford

FAMOUS FOR
Lego Star Wars, Lego Dimensions, Lego Worlds

WHAT'S NEXT
Lego Marvel Superheroes 2

TT Games is, in large part, responsible for helping Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment expand into the videogame market. One of the biggest studios in the UK – branching out since its acquisition in 2007 to include TT Fusion, TT Animation and mobile developer Playdemic – TT Games is wholeheartedly focused on developing titles that can be enjoyed by players of all ages, in solo or co-operative play. It's been a huge success; while so many big UK studios have shuttered in recent years, TT Games continues to find success in its format and formula, steadily expanding its reach and expanding its horizons as the markets change. Since the release of *Lego Star Wars* in 2005 we've had over 30 Lego games, set in the worlds of the biggest IPs in the world – it's impressive, it's consistent and it has brought a lot of money to the UK development industry.

CHUCKLEFISH



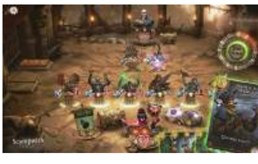
This indie studio erupted onto the scene in 2016 with its development on *Starbound* and the success it found publishing farming hit *Stardew Valley*, although it's the studio's upcoming work that has caught our eye. Between *Wargroove* and *Spellbound* (both slated for 2018) Chucklefish looks to be one of the most exciting indie studios to emerge out of the UK in years.

HELLO GAMES



No Man's Sky may have had a rocky launch, but the work that Hello Games has done in the past year is nothing short of spectacular. Say what you will about the game and company, but its passion is undeniable. From stunt bike racing in *Joe Danger* to exploring the infinite possibilities of space with *No Man's Sky*, we can't wait to see what the studio does next.

MEDIATONIC GAMES



Active since 2005, Mediatonic games has become one of the fastest working and most prolific game companies in the country. Known for its high-profile partnerships with the likes of Disney and Adult Swim, Mediatonic is a reliable studio that has been quietly expanding and improving itself for a decade.

ROCKSTAR NORTH



A studio that needs no introduction, Rockstar North has been at the forefront of the videogame industry for decades. From *Grand Theft Auto* to *Manhunt*, *L.A. Noire* to *Max Payne 3*, there's no end to its ingenuity and creativity. All eyes are, of course, on *Red Dead Redemption II* now.

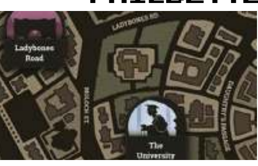


SLIGHTLY MAD STUDIOS



Making its debut in 2009 with *Need For Speed*: *Shift*, Slightly Mad Studios has only gone from strength to strength. Following the development and release of *Project Cars* it not only established itself as a powerful force in the sim genre, but also helped put the UK back on the map as *the* hub for racing game innovation.

FAILBETTER GAMES



Ever since its founding in 2010, Failbetter Games has made something of a name for itself. Its team is focused on fantastic storytelling and worldbuilding, with a particular focus on the quality of the narrative design. Failbetter's Fallen London browser games quickly obtained a cult following and we get the feeling the studio has a bright future ahead of it.

BOSSA STUDIOS



Here's the thing about Bossa Studios: it's impossible to play its games without finding a huge smile creeping across your face. Between *Surgeon Simulator*, *I Am Bread* and *World's Adrift*, the studio has demonstrated a strong capacity for pushing expectation and finding breakthrough ways to generate enjoyment out of interactive play.

CODEMASTERS



With a history stretching back over three decades, Codemasters has had its ups and its downs. Thankfully, the talented teams installed at the legendary British development outfit have pushed for a turn of fortune; the Dirt Rally series and the annualised Formula 1 racing games are proof that Codemasters is still a dominate force on the track.

CLIMAX STUDIOS

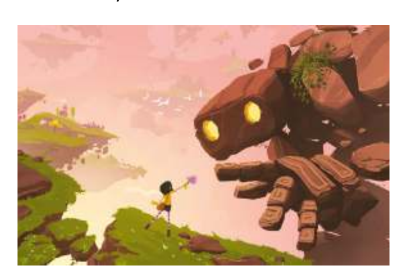
Founded: 1988 • Location: Portsmouth

FAMOUS FOR
Silent Hill Origins, Lola and The Giant

WHAT'S NEXT
Surf

With over 100 titles to its name over the last 30 years, Climax has quietly become one of the UK's most determined outlets for creativity across a, frankly, ridiculous amount of systems and formats. The studio rose to prominence in 2006 as it became the first developer outside of Team Silent to work on the Silent Hill franchise, delivering *Origins* and *Shattered Memories* during its partnership with Konami. Since then, Climax has been focused on lending its expertise to other studios across the globe. It contributed three beautiful side-scrolling stealth games for Ubisoft and the Assassin's Creed franchise, it has worked to quickly port titles between a variety of systems and, perhaps more importantly, has begun to push the boundaries of mobile VR – its most recent title, *Lola And The Giant*, showing the true potential of Google's proprietary Daydream VR headset. Climax is a hard-working studio that represents British resilience and perseverance at its best.

> "Diversity of people and projects are at the heart of Climax Studios. Set by Portsmouth Harbour with absolutely beautiful views, we've worked on games across a wide spectrum of platforms. With a culture of raising people up and fostering new talent, opportunities for collaboration and creativity make working here incredibly exciting!"
>
> **ANNA HOLLINRAKE,**
> **Senior Artist, Climax Studios**





MEDIA MOLECULE

Founded: 2006 • Location: Guildford

FAMOUS FOR
LittleBigPlanet, Tearaway

WHAT'S NEXT
Dreams

Few companies can boast having made as much of an immediate impact as Media Molecule. Established in 2006 and acquired by Sony in 2010, the fleet-footed (and notoriously small) team's first game would be *LittleBigPlanet* and it would never look back from its incredible creation. The game drove a new way of thinking, not only internally at Sony, but across much of the industry. *LittleBigPlanet*'s mantra of "Play, Create, Share" has had a far-reaching impact on the way games are designed and the way in which we, as players, consume them – a reach that's actually difficult to define. While *Tearaway* didn't have the same impact as its successful predecessor, it still demonstrated that Media Molecule is capable of innovation. *Dreams*, its PS4-exclusive title, may have been long in development, but we're certain that it's going to be well worth the wait – we expect nothing but the best from this exemplary British studio.

UBISOFT REFLECTIONS

Founded: 1984 • Location: Newcastle Upon Tyne

FAMOUS FOR
Driver, Destruction Derby, The Division

WHAT'S NEXT
TBC

Reflections is basically a British institution at this point. Established in 1984, it's one of the biggest and most important studios in the country – though its influence often goes unnoticed. Responsible for creating the Driver and Destruction Derby franchises, Reflections is now more commonly understood to be a support studio, although that's only partly true. The truth is that it's responsible for driving much of the technological innovations at the powerhouse publisher. Massive Entertainment may have, for example, had its name front and centre on *The Division*, but it was Reflections that built out over half of the world, many of its underlying systems – not to mention the incredible procedural underground DLC missions. *Watch Dogs 2* and *Ghost Recon Wildlands* may be products of the Montreal and Paris teams, respectively, but it's Reflections that refined the tech behind its all-important vehicles and AI. Reflections, from its smaller titles like *Grow Home* that focus on experimentation, to the larger projects it works on from the shadows, is an important part of the UK scene's past, present and future.



SUPERMASSIVE GAMES



Founded: 2008 • Location: Guildford

FAMOUS FOR
Until Dawn

WHAT'S NEXT
Hidden Agenda, The Inpatient, Bravo Team

Innovation and experimentation is at the heart of Supermassive Games. It may have began life as a support studio, working with Media Molecule on DLC for *LittleBigPlanet* and with Sony on developing products to push the emerging Move technology, but Supermassive quickly came into its own in 2015 with the release of *Until Dawn*. With over 100 staff at its headquarters in Surrey, Guildford, the studio has established a reputation for challenging convention – particularly when it comes to storytelling and building incredible virtual spaces.

Until Dawn won the studio accolades, was recognised by BAFTA for its excellence, but it's what comes next that really shows its ambition. *Hidden Agenda*, demonstrating the studio's appetite for weaving storytelling into interactive experiences. *The Inpatient* and *Bravo Team*, a showcase of the independent studio's potential within virtual reality systems. Supermassive Games is one of the leading studios in the UK pushing for accessible play, for high-end interactive drama, and boundary breaking VR games.

> Supermassive Games has a ridiculously high aspiration for quality in every detail. We spend a significant amount of time together as teams, looking at what we've done and looking at what we've made. We have a philosophy of software all the time, our drive is to get things up and running and reviewable right away. We like to be fluid, it allows us to drive our aspirations

PETE SAMUELS,
Managing director, Supermassive Games



SUMO DIGITAL

Founded: 2003 • Location: Sheffield

FAMOUS FOR
Sonic & Sega All Stars Racing

WHAT'S NEXT
Dead Island 2, Crackdown 3, Project Nova

Sumo Digital has quickly become one of the most trusted pair of hands in the industry. It's the studio many turn to when it needs to outsource critical portions of development out of house, leading to Sumo contributing to a variety of major franchises including Forza, Dead Space, Hitman and LittleBigPlanet. With rumours that the company is preparing to go public – in an IPO (initial public offering) thought to be worth over £150 million – the future looks bright for the Sheffield-based company. While it has built a reputation working as a support team, 2018 sees the studio driving innovation in some of last generation's most successful series; it's currently building the single-player campaign for *Crackdown 3* and has overhauled development on *Dead Island 2* after Deep Silver severed its ties with Yager Development in 2016.

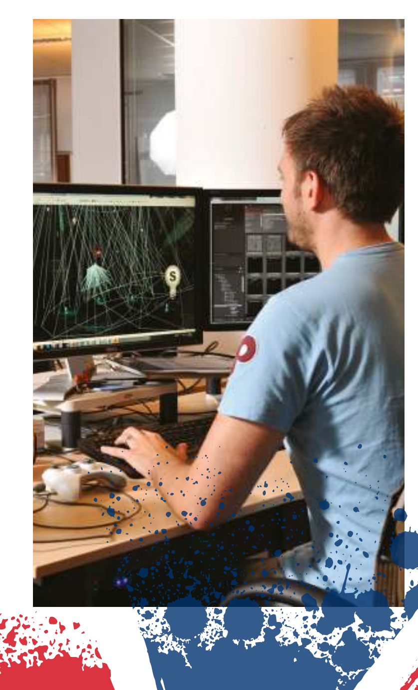
NINJA THEORY

Founded: 2000 • Location: Cambridge

FAMOUS FOR
Enslaved: Odyssey To The West, Hellblade

WHAT'S NEXT
TBC

Ninja Theory has never had it easy. The studio has worked tirelessly to create stylish and thoughtful action-adventure games that, for whatever reason, have tended to provoke certain swaths of the gaming community. But there's always been an undeniable level of excellence to its releases; *Enslaved: Odyssey To The West* proved that Ninja Theory is perhaps one of the only studios outside of Naughty Dog that's capable of delivering thrilling, cinematic action without sacrificing the storytelling or visual fidelity. *DmC: Devil May Cry* showed that the team is confident in its ability to take a legendary series and breath new life into its action, while 2017's *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* was a powerful and challenging game that also happened to feature some of the best motion capture performances that we have seen all generation. Ninja Theory might be a small studio, but it uses its leanness to its advantage. Given the skill of the team and its quick adoption of new technology, there is still more greatness to come in the future of this amazing group, and we're looking forward to seeing what it delivers next.



> At Ninja Theory, we want to make beautiful experiences; beautiful and entertaining games. That has been our desire for a while. I think we have hit the mark a few times over the years, with *Heavenly Sword*, *Enslaved*, *DmC*, and now *Hellblade*, and I think we have progressed with each one. I think *Hellblade* looks great, and hopefully everyone agrees with that!

ANDREW VIDLER,
Technical director, Ninja Theory

ARE YOU 4K READY?







While Microsoft might have the hardware lead with the Xbox One X, Sony still currently has the most exciting array of 4K and HDR games on the horizon thanks to titles like *Spider-Man* and *God Of War.*

YOUR GUIDE TO THE IMPORTANT ELEMENTS OF GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THE EXPERIENCE WHETHER ON PC OR CONSOLE

With the launch of the Xbox One X we have entered into a unified 4K era of gaming. With Microsoft's latest offering alongside the PS4 Pro and the continued performance lead of PC, 4K is now the standard for this generation of gaming. As such we thought it would be a good idea to review and refresh on the ins and outs of what makes 4K gaming tick, what TVs and other displays you should be looking at, what games best show off the format and more. We've covered some of this ground in the past, but this time we're also leaning on the expertise of our colleagues at T3, the renowned technology magazine. They've been tracking the cutting edge of TV and gaming tech for even longer than ourselves and together we can guide you through the pitfalls and opportunities upgrading to 4K gaming entails.

WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT 4K?

While these displays have four times the pixel density of HD screens it's more than fair to say that 4K displays are an evolution rather than a revolution of the viewing experience. But that's not so bad, especially for games. What 4K offers over and above HD is a smoother, cleaner, crisper and sharper image that is best expressed in high frame-rates. While most TV and movies run at 24fps, live sports and videogames demand a much higher refresh rate for the best possible experience and 4K really helps elevate that.

The other important thing to remember is that 4K demands a large screen. If you can go upwards of 55 inches that would be best. The larger the display the better for appreciating that upgrade in picture quality because at the very least you can essentially enjoy the games and movies you love at as good or better quality across a bigger canvas. With the quality of motion capture the industry is now using alongside a generally improved level of art direction in the last few years, getting the most out of every pixel can be a transformative and far more engaging experience in 4K.

Over the last couple of years, 4K has been in its infancy, gradually gaining ground and technological support in terms of Ultra HD media players and streaming services. Now that this is all coming together and games consoles have joined the front line, you can expect to see this visual standard becoming the mainstay. Sooner or later, you're probably going to want to move to a 4K display and devices to match.



FINDING A GOOD DISPLAY

Some of the old rules don't really apply to shopping for 4K displays as we've probably discussed in the past. For instance, while contrast ratios were a pretty good measure for HD televisions, those numbers have become a little tougher to trust. You'll need to see for yourself what kind of black levels and brightness a TV can handle, which means you might want to eyeball some TVs before committing to a purchase.

By now you're probably more or less familiar with the difference between LCD and OLED screens – beyond the expense and better colour performance of the latter – but there have been some new innovations in recent years that make LCD a lot more competitive. For instance, keep an eye out for local dimming options, particularly for full-array LED displays, since these have improved backlighting performance that helps get a little more out of the darker images on screen. Similarly, quantum dots are something you might see. These are an additional layer of nanocrystals that light up with the LEDs in the screen, particularly good for HDR performance. OLED is a lot more expensive, but the picture is categorically better since each LED can be turned off for perfect recreations of a black image.

Beyond that you shouldn't sniff at some of the smaller details. Curved displays are essentially for show. We're personally not big fans of them, but if you're into that by all means go ahead, it just wouldn't be our pick. We would recommend, however, looking at how many HDMI ports you have available. The more the better, frankly. Plus some USB ports would be good too. Just consider how many devices you will want connected and maybe have a couple of ports spare.

And finally, you want to look for high refresh rates of 120Hz to 240Hz. They go higher, but we'd be wary of trusting all of those figures. You might end up paying a lot more for a feature you won't experience much benefit from right now. 120Hz will give you amazing performance as it stands. And 'effective refresh rate' is a term to be wary of too, since it can mean that the refresh rate is actually half of the figure stated.

PERFORMANCE ENHANCERS

Moving to 4K is about more than just visuals, as much as that might be the subject that dominates the conversation. The Xbox One X features support for Dolby Atmos, which is best served by a multi-speaker setup, but can be very ably applied to compatible soundbars to give your audio experience a bit of a boost. One of the benefits of Dolby Atmos, though, is that it gives you height as well as surround sound, so more of a home cinema package might be in order. Again, look for Dolby Atmos compatibility here to make sure you get that overhead feel from your games. Those choppers in *Gears Of War 4*, for instance, will sound absolutely amazing.

Make sure you have high speed HDMI cables to achieve those 4K visuals. Your PS4 Pro or Xbox One X will come with one of these in the box, but any other devices might need you to grab them for yourself. Xbox One X pass-through functionality – which enables you to watch TV or other media through the Xbox – does not currently support 4K, so that's worth knowing.

And as a general rule, sit a little closer to your TV if you can. The higher pixel density of 4K TVs means you actually get much greater benefit from sitting closer, since you still won't be able to see the pixels. Plus you can control the display's brightness a little better now too, so it shouldn't be a such a strain on your eyes.

THE BENEFITS OF HDR

We've touched upon HDR (or High Dynamic Range) at this point, but not really gone into too much depth about it beyond it offering a greater variety and richness of colour. That's pretty much the headline-grabbing feature, but what does that really mean for playing games?

For a start the very nature of games as a digitally animated product, for the most part, means that it benefits greatly from colours being displayed brightly and with as much variety and differentiation as possible. HDR is capable of displaying a greater array of colours, which means softer blends between similar colours and starker lines between contrasting ones. It should »




There are some great-looking games already available in 4K, including *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* on PS4 Pro and *Middle-Earth: Shadow Of War* for the Xbox One X.

help bring out the vibrancy of the image on screen in a way that HD or standard 4K on its own could never achieve.

It also helps to increase the difference between black and white on the screen. The nature of backlit TVs tends to lead to darker moments on the screen still inherently needing some illumination – except with OLED where the LED can just turn off for a moment. Local dimming and HDR support generally means that the TV is better placed to compensate for that with localised lighting effects. This should, in turn, give images greater depth.

And being able to get more variety of colour from every pixel means that videogames, such as *Uncharted 4* or *Shadow Of War* – where the environment is such a key player – can really sing. Homogenous forests or deserts can feel so much more alive and varied with HDR applied. You only need to look at how good *Forza Horizon 3* looked on the Xbox One S to see how HDR takes visuals up to completely different level. 4K without HDR just looks a bit washed out.

IS IT WORTH THE MONEY?

All of the tech specs and eye-catching features in the world can't distract from the biggest barrier to the 4K upgrade and that's price. We're not going to dodge the issue here, it's expensive. The Xbox One X is an expensive console. The PS4 Pro is a little cheaper, but still pricey and it may not be as future-proofed for 4K as Microsoft's offering. Meanwhile upgrading a PC is maybe not quite as pricey so long as your rig is more or less up to date, but there can still be some additional expenses to consider. The TVs and monitors can be devastatingly priced, particularly if you want to plump for the performance of an OLED screen and want it to be as big as possible.

Then there are the other investments, such soundbars or home cinema setups to consider. You might even need a new TV stand to fit all of this extra gear on. The money can add up. But then again, if you already have a 4K TV and one of the two consoles or you're a PC gamer with a solid enough rig to start with, the upgrade to 4K is really quite reasonable. Unlike a new generation of consoles, you have a bunch of 4K and HDR ready games in your collection already. You don't necessarily need to stock up on flashy new titles to feel like you're getting your money's worth. And even if a game or movie isn't 4K, it should still look better on a newer TV thanks to upscaling.

This is going to be the standard for a while. It's hard to say for how long that will remain the case and what upgrade might be around the corner, but for the foreseeable future 4K is going to be where it's at, so whether you spend a lot of money now or wait and spend a fair amount of money later probably doesn't make much difference. If you're going to keep up with gaming trends, this is where you'll need to be looking.

BEST 4K/HDR CONSOLE GAMES

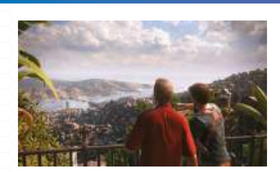
SOME TITLES THAT JUSTIFY ALL THAT EXPENSE WITH THEIR VISUALS

PS4 PRO



HORIZON ZERO DAWN

A stunning game from launch to now, *Horizon* also happens to be one of the best RPGs we've played in a while. Visually, it's a fantastic showcase for what the PS4 Pro can do in 4K with wonderful vistas and great details to be picked out.



UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END

Naughty Dog has never been a slouch in the graphics department and 4K images only help to better show off the kind of detail, particularly in its character design and rendering, that makes this studio one of the best in the business.



THE LAST GUARDIAN

While it sits between generations in some respects thanks to its protracted development, there remains something quite beautiful about this follow-up to *Shadow Of The Colossus* and until the new remaster of that game comes along, this will do nicely.



FINAL FANTASY XV

Square's series feels more at home on a PlayStation these days, so it seems only fitting that it should have some great 4K and HDR support on PS4 Pro. It was already a great-looking game, but with this kind of enhancement it really shines.



GRAN TURISMO SPORT

The GT titles are at the forefront of Sony's drive for graphical superiority and this has never been more the case than with some of the near photo-realistic vehicles and tracks you get here. We're blessed with good-looking racers in 4K right now.

XBOX ONE X



MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF WAR

Just as *Shadow Of Mordor* supported the launch of the PS4 Pro, so *Shadow Of War* is backing the Xbox One X with 4K and HDR visuals to help you get the most spectacle from Tolkien's world. That this is the more colourful game also helps.



FORZA MOTORSPORT 7

As PS4 Pro has Gran Turismo, so Xbox One X has Forza and this is yet another stunning feast for the eyes with everything rendered to the limit of what the Xbox One X can achieve. Turn10 is a master of pushing the Xbox consoles to their limit.



MINECRAFT

A big graphical enhancement patch means that a game that was once synonymous with rough-and-ready visuals is going to be one of the best-looking games on Xbox One X. With its improved effects, you're going to want to check this one out.



ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS

With its epic scale and vibrant design, *Assassin's Creed Origins* might be the best game in the series to be enjoyed in 4K. Thanks to Ultra HD visual support and HDR, it couldn't look any better than on the Xbox One X this year.



RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER

Launched first on Xbox One, given a 4K upgrade for PS4 Pro and now returning to Xbox One X, this is now the best-looking version of the game that you'll find out there. And that's saying something, because it was already an impressive release.

THE PC OPTION

LEAVE THE RAT RACE BEHIND

As any PC gamer will tell you, the Xbox One X might be the most powerful games console on the market, but it looks positively meagre compared to what you could build for yourself on PC with the right knowledge and a little extra money. So, why go 4K on a PC? Well, for a start, you're in control of the graphical output, so you know you're getting 4K when you build your rig. Unlike on console where upscaling may be happening or shortcuts get taken, your PC will run games as you have dictated. You are all-powerful.

Prices can vary, of course, and the PC market can fluctuate rather a lot, but we would think you could get a graphics card equivalent in processing power to the Xbox One X for around £300. Then it's just a question of building out from there with sound, RAM, cooling system and so on. And remember that 4K monitor displays can be very competitively priced and often come with dedicated gaming features to help maintain picture quality.

And then you have the benefit of having a PC potent enough that it can take advantage of the much more fully featured Virtual Reality (VR) experiences of headsets such as the HTC Vive or Oculus Rift.



Don't want an Xbox One X or a PS4 Pro for 4K gaming? There's a lot to be said for building your own custom PC gaming rig instead – and you'll be able to take advantage of Virtual Reality headsets from the likes of HTC and Oculus too.



BEST 4K TVS

SOME TOP PICKS FROM T3

LG OLED E6 SERIES

Available in 55" and 65" varieties, the E6 displays offer an elegant design, and great black levels, which should mean deep contrast. Being an OLED display, each pixel generates its own light, which results in a super crisp image with no colour bleed.

PRICE RANGE: £2,059-£3,500

PANASONIC DX802 SERIES



Offering some pretty amazing value for money given the quality of the display you're getting, the DX802 is available with a 50" or 58" display and comes with a soundbar, which is ideal for improved audio if you don't have a surround sound setup. We quite like the easel design too.

PRICE RANGE: £999-£1,249

SAMSUNG KS7000 SERIES

Another quite reasonably priced series of 4K TVs when compared to the market at large, the Samsung offerings range from the relatively small 49" display to the intimidating 65" variety. The KS7000 series is a good all-rounder and does a very good job with HDR images.

PRICE RANGE: £799-£1,298

PANASONIC DX902 SERIES



A step up in price from this series from Panasonic means a step up in quality too with fantastic contrast and a user friendly interface. The DX902 also has a honeycomb panel design that manages to get a lot more out of the LCD display than would normally be expected.

PRICE RANGE: £1,729-£2,299

SONY XD9405 SERIES



This is actually the 75" variety of the same 4K TV we use on **games™** for all of our reviews and we can tell you from experience, it's a great gaming display. The picture quality is top-notch and it has tons of app support with its Android TV OS. This large one is pretty pricey, though.

PRICE RANGE: £3,999-£4,999





STAR WARS

INTENT AND EXECUTION

BATTLEFRONT II

WILL DICE, MOTIVE STUDIOS AND CRITERION BE ABLE TO WHISK US OFF TO A GALAXY, FAR, FAR AWAY? OR HAS THIS AMBITIOUS SEQUEL SUCCUMBED TO THE DARK SIDE OF DEVELOPMENT? JOIN US AS WE DELIVER OUR FINAL VERDICT ON STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II AHEAD OF REVIEW

S*tar Wars Battlefront* was too basic, some said. Sure, it looked good, but it stripped away many of the comfortable familiarities of the modern shooter. Loadout configurations, varied modes and maps, class-based combat: it was all removed in favour of accessibility. 2015's *Battlefront* was, ultimately, the *Rogue One* of Star Wars tie-ins: all style, no substance.

DICE prided itself on removing the barriers for players new to online shooters, offering a spectacular starting point for Star Wars fans keen to jump into large scale multiplayer combat for the first time. And with a hefty library of original sights and sounds from the iconic movies at its disposal, it nailed the aesthetics – you didn't have to be a Star Wars fan to admire the achingly astute attention to detail. But whilst it did indeed strip back the shooter experience for newbies, once they got there… well, there was little there to hold the attention for long. Without a campaign mode, much variation, or indeed much in the way of character progression, it quickly grew stale. While DICE's regular rotation of new maps and missions – not to mention an impressive slate of varied premium DLC content – prolonged its life, it was too little too late: *Battlefront* was a victim of its own stunning, but ultimately shallow, gameplay.

It's this that *Battlefront II* seeks to address. With a shiny, all-new single-player campaign from Motive Studios, new depth to its multiplayer play, the introduction of space battles and a refined focus on delivering a deeper experience across the board, *Battlefront II* aspires to be the stuff of dreams for Star Wars fans and shooter aficionados alike. **games™** has gotten its hands-on every aspect of *Battlefront II*, so, join us as we see if it delivers, eh?



ARCADE

Just want to shoot stuff in the face? We hear you, and so does DICE, apparently. Arcade mode offers small, intense battles that strip away all the noise and distraction – trading spectacle for an opportunity to play contained, co-operative combat scenarios with your friends.

Small doesn't necessarily mean easier, though. Sure, it's quicker to find, and take out, the AI enemies in the scaled-down environment, but that just means it's easier for your foes to find you, too. Thanks to the objective-based play, and the instant respawn, you're never far from the action, either; something Galactic Assault – with its generous map and lengthy respawn – simply can't offer.

Is it repetitive? Yeah, a bit. But it's faster than Galactic Assault and Star Battles, offering the kind of speed and instant gratification you'll find in other contemporary shooters of its ilk. But it's a refreshing alternative to the lengthy battles in other modes, and the perfect challenge for a player short on time. So whilst it's easy to overlook Arcade and its simplistic premise for the grandiose cinematography of Star Battles, for instance, you'll be doing yourself a disservice – Arcade offers some unique opportunities you simply won't find elsewhere in *Battlefront II*. This is also available as split-screen couch co-op, too, which means there's a legitimate excuse to buddy-up in real-life as well as online.

GALACTIC ASSAULT

Galactic Assault, one of *Star War Battlefront II*'s core multiplayer modes, pits the Rebellion against the Imperials in a substantial 20-v-20 assault, culminating in the attack (or defence, depending upon which flavour you're playing as) on a famous locale from the Star Wars universe. We spent our time in the company of the Clone Troopers and Droids during our substantial hands-on session, attempting to seize the palace of Naboo, situated helpfully in the middle of the map.

As a Clone Trooper, your task is to find the Ion Launchers conveniently scattered across the map in order to slow down the Multi-Troop Transport (MTT) sloping its way into town. As you might imagine, this is easier said than done (especially as it's not always easy to see your foes against the busy textures of the environment; the tall, thin variety of bot neatly camouflage themselves against the rich brown backdrops of Theed). Though not as big as some of the maps we stomped across in 2015's *Battlefield*, it's nevertheless large enough to accommodate those bastards who like to hunker down and snipe, but compact enough for players who want to see the whites of their enemy's eyes as they take them out. You'll probably find it easier working as a fireteam, as co-operative co-ordination is helpful, especially if you know someone's locked and loaded ready to fire a Launcher and can prepare accordingly.

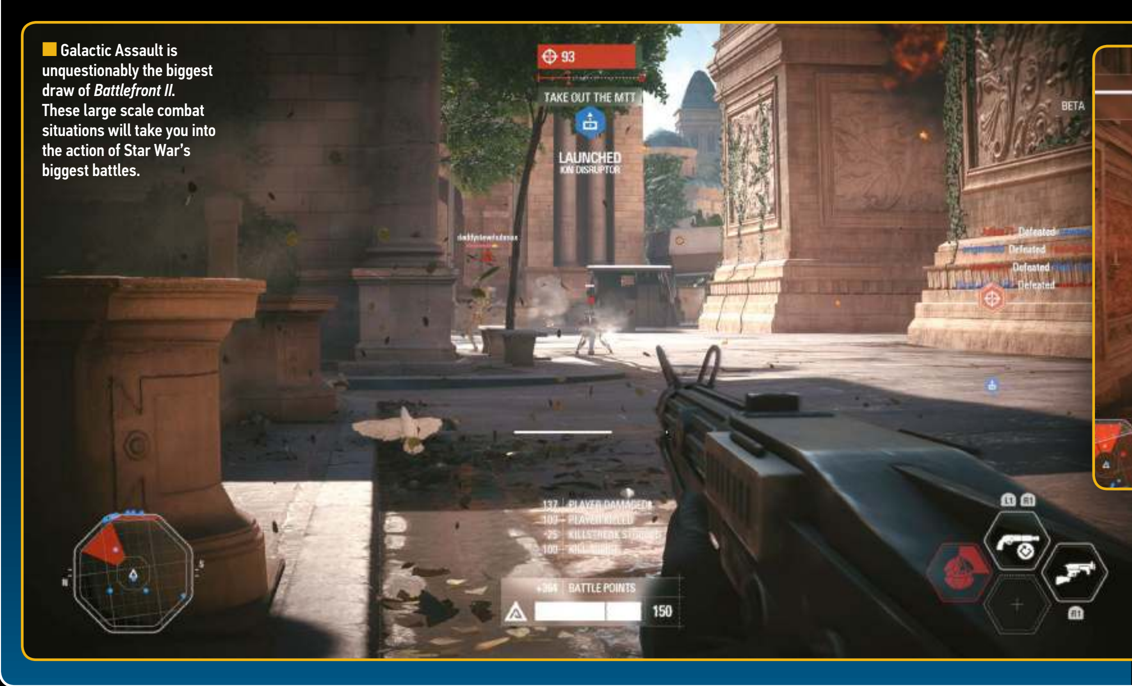
Your arsenal includes additional rewards, unlocked by amassing Battle Points – an in-game currency collected by kills and pulling off game objectives, which also enables you to access new heroes and vehicles. Naturally, the better you are, the quicker you'll unlock these, but the game's generous enough – everyone should get to play as Rey or Darth Maul (or whomever you like best) at least once per mission.

Talking of which, the Heroes are no longer the mutant bullet sponges we encountered in the first *Battlefront*, and rather than drop randomly, anyone can 'save up' and 'buy' Han Solo. While they still wield specialist weapons and abilities, no longer are they insurmountable, which makes one-on-one battles considerably less frustrating if you happen to be on the wrong end of one.

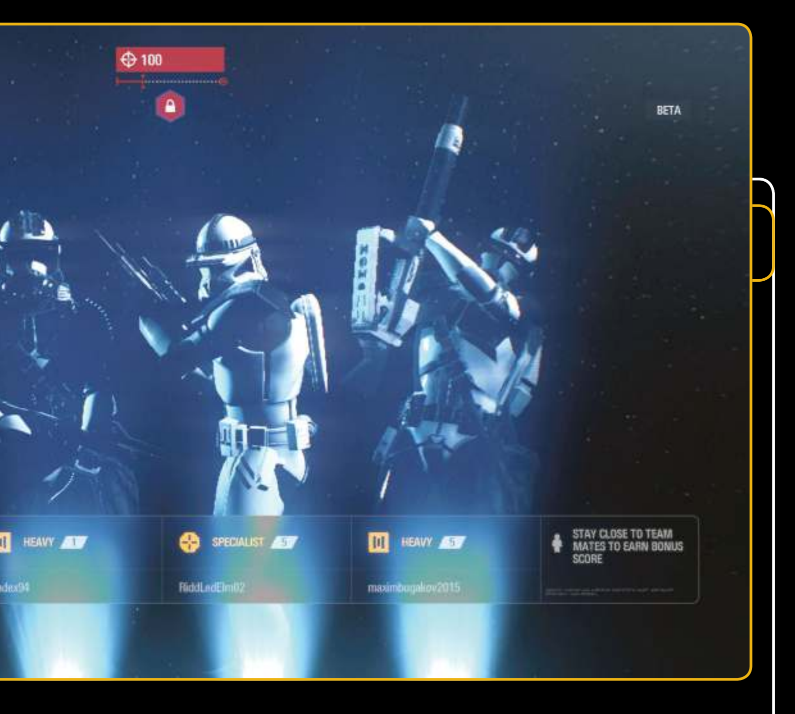
Spawning can take a while, though. The game queues up five reanimated comrades together, so depending on if you're the first or third to kark it, it may take several seconds to get you back into the action owing to the surprising absence of squad-based spawning. While this undoubtedly balances combat for the better (squad-based spawning is all well and good until you're facing it as an enemy), it does slow things down.

Classes make a triumphant or terrible arrival, depending on which side of the argument you fall on. There are four to choose from; Assault, Officer, Specialist, and Heavy. Assault gives the all-round abilities you'd expect, but offers nothing spectacular, and you will still need some skill to take out your opponents. Heavies tout a formidable shield and whilst they are destroyable, they're an annoyance to face in the field, particularly with their substantial health point reserves – so you probably shouldn't take one on without a squad to back you up.

The officer? Though not without merit, like other support classes



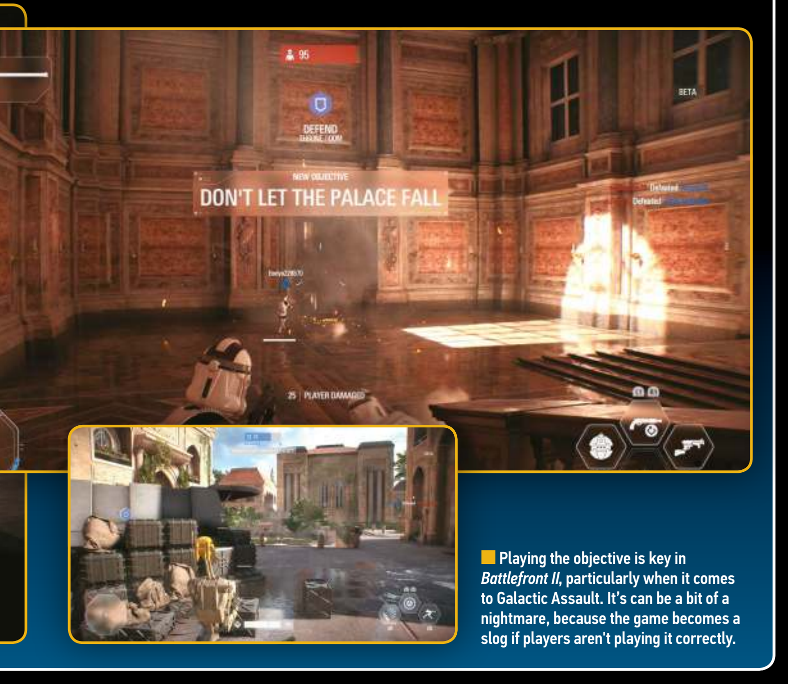
Galactic Assault is unquestionably the biggest draw of *Battlefront II*. These large scale combat situations will take you into the action of Star War's biggest battles.



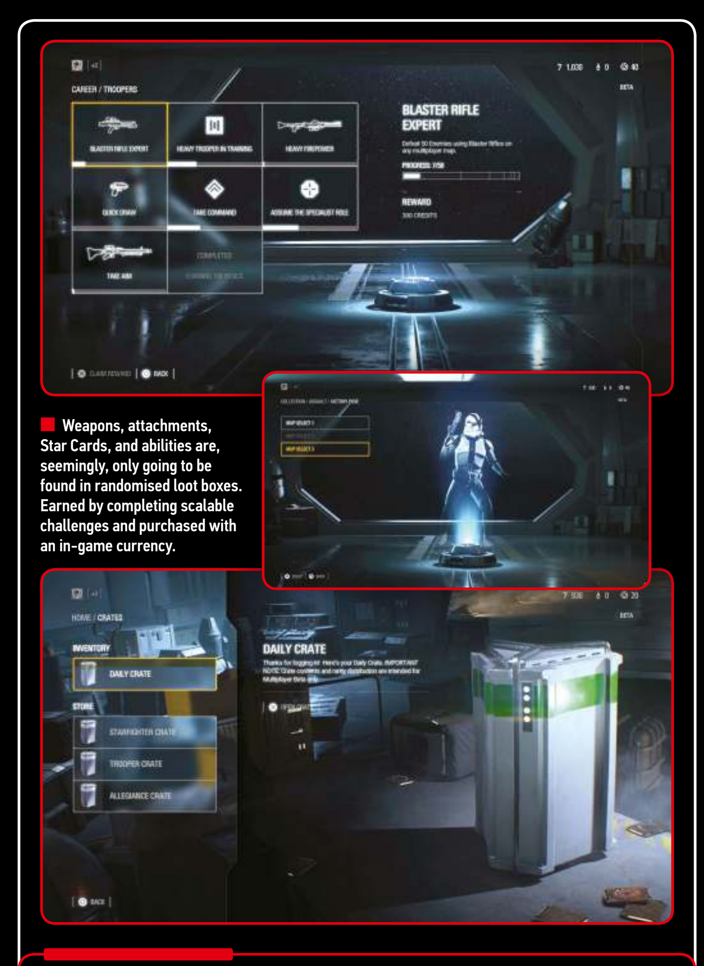
in a slew of games before this, any perks of being an Officer lag some way behind its counterparts. Sure, its turrets are cool, and the pistols are easy to handle, but unless you're tackling this battle with intense co-ordination (or are good at hiding), you're going to need to be objective-based, not combat. And don't get us started on the Specialist's Infiltration ability, which switches out your sniper for a carbine and highlights all enemies on your map; it's monstrously overpowered, and needs nothing short of a devastating nerf to better balance the field.

Failure to take down the MTT (which happens more often than not) means the mission's success or failure is determined by your efforts to secure – or storm – the throne room and a King Of The Hill-esque objective. And it's a blast to play, regardless of which flavour you're playing as; sneaking through the palace and taking out the guards is endlessly satisfying, as is standing your ground and taking out the enemy as they funnel through the doorways.

Galactic Assault is the jewel of *Battlefront II*, the multiplayer experience that everything revolves around. DICE has nailed it; the spectacle of Star Wars is to be found here, bringing everything that the game has to offer into one sprawling brawl, from intimate ground battles, empowering hero battles and dogfights in the skies above the chaos.



Playing the objective is key in *Battlefront II*, particularly when it comes to Galactic Assault. It's can be a bit of a nightmare, because the game becomes a slog if players aren't playing it correctly.



Weapons, attachments, Star Cards, and abilities are, seemingly, only going to be found in randomised loot boxes. Earned by completing scalable challenges and purchased with an in-game currency.

CUSTOMISATION AND PROGRESSION

Yup, the rumours are true; *Star Wars Battlefront II* has introduced randomised loot boxes.

Not dissimilar to the loot crates in *Overwatch*, the loot system 'awards' players with add-on items, such as Star Cards, weapons, parts, cosmetic tweaks, and attachments. The crates can be unlocked by shelling out Battle Points – the in-game credit/currency you amass during gameplay – or, naturally, we can only presume, your hard-earned real-life coinage. Right now, it's difficult to gauge quite how profound their effect will be on gameplay, or if they will – as feared by some – in any way gate or impede progress.

While most can make peace with the cosmetic buffs or generic items, Star Cards – defined by four levels of rarity – offer temporary in-game perks that can boost, or sometimes replace, your class-based abilities is a little harder to swallow. Developer DICE is anxious for us to know that the beta drops were not representative of the final game, but nonetheless – and perhaps unsurprisingly – the beta only heightened player concerns. But given it's hard to decipher whether or not you were just taken out by a player as a consequence of their skill or Star Card, we'd cautiously suggest the time to panic is not yet... although, let's face it, with any randomised and potentially pay-to-win loot system, this is not a favourable development. *Battlefront II* features more depth that its predecessor, that much is certain, although DICE's decision to hide its progression system behind such a randomised, impossible-to-track system is certainly going to have its detractors. Whether or not *Battlefront II* is able to feel consistently fun for long periods of time with its customisation and upgrades locked behind loot boxes is one of the biggest unanswered questions going in to the launch.

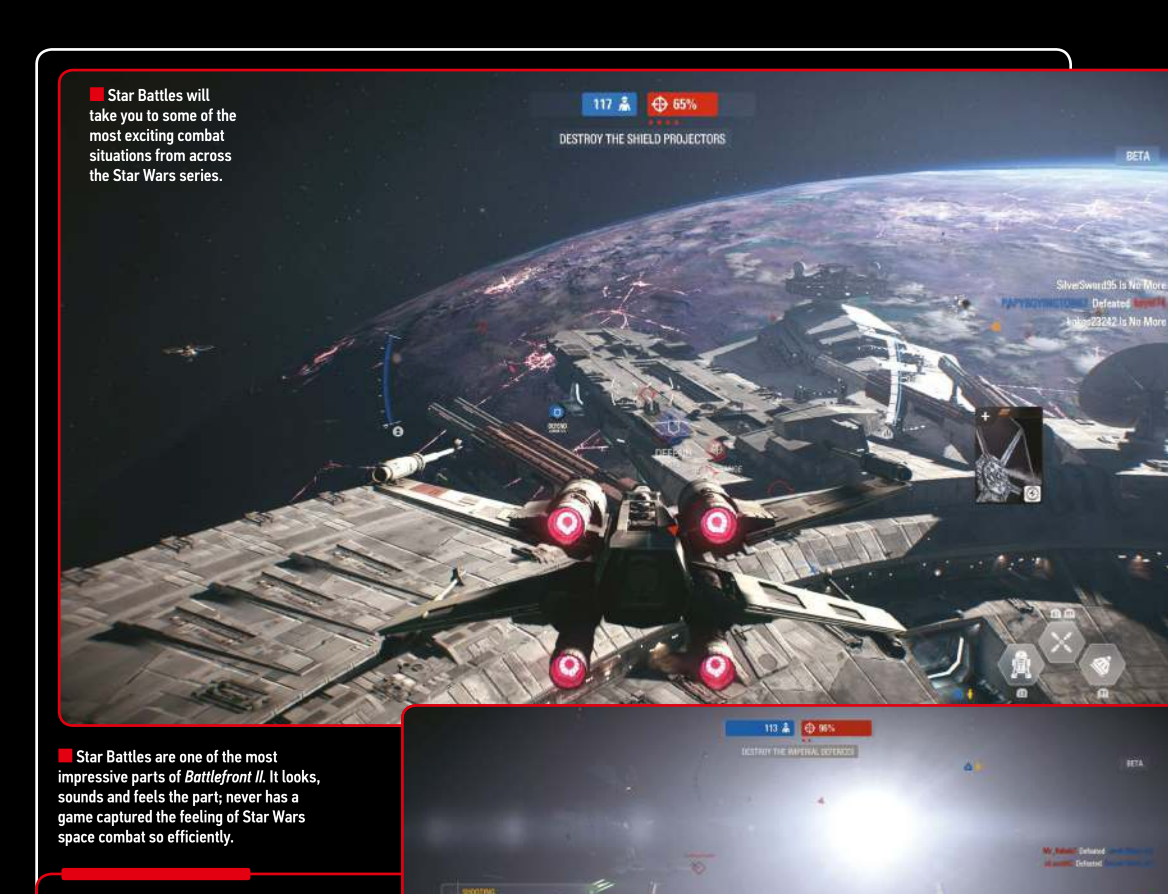
STRIKE

If you prefer your gunfights to be a little more intimate, *Battlefront II*'s Strike offers smaller, simpler objective-based 16-player battles that strip away much of *Battlefront*'s usual fare – vehicles, heroes and such – in favour of tighter, more streamlined battles that rely more heavily on skill, strategy and positioning.

Like Galactic Assault there's a focus on objectives, but without the distractions, the trimmer, quicker combat rewards a more strategic approach. While the odds seem unduly stacked against the attacking team – in this instance the rebels, tasked with getting into a fortified location to lift an artifact (the box that contained Luke's lost lightsaber, for those of you with a keen eye) unscathed is harder than you might think – there are plenty of places to take stealthy cover, and there's a real thrill in sneaking through the brush and undergrowth to take down unsuspecting foes… providing an observant sniper high up in the walls of Maz Kanata's castle doesn't catch you first, of course.

Best of all, it's rarely a fait accompli here. Even if an enemy's hot-footing it with the precious cargo, it's not over until it's over. The artifact's always visible via your UI, which means it's a frantic rush regardless of whether you're the one carrying that package… or intent on taking it down. Strike has proven to be a nice distraction from the size and noise of Galactic Assault – more intimate and competitive, faster and more immediate in its action.





Star Battles will take you to some of the most exciting combat situations from across the Star Wars series.

Star Battles are one of the most impressive parts of *Battlefront II*. It looks, sounds and feels the part; never has a game captured the feeling of Star Wars space combat so efficiently.

STAR BATTLES

We dare anyone to slip into a TIE fighter and not feel the force (okay, okay, we're sorry). Admittedly, it wouldn't take much to improve on the (sparsely seen) space combat we saw last time, but Starfighter Assault unites stunning visuals, authentic audio, and effective gunplay for what is arguably one of *Battlefront II*'s strongest modes.

Starfighter Assault is a busy but satisfying 20-vs-20 dogfight in space that, like Galactic Assault, tasks you in carrying out a range of objectives as the Empire and Rebels battle it out. Play as the Rebels, and you must destroy generators in order to disable the goliath's main reactor shields in the shadow of an imposing Star Destroyer. Given the hectic horizon, enemy bullets, and intense manoeuvrability of the ships, this is easier said than done, and you might occasionally feel overwhelmed by the various icons pulsing and flashing across your UI (not to mention the constant unwanted attention of your foes, of course).

Play as the Empire, though, and naturally the tables turn, and your job is to swat away the pesky Rebel flies. It's a big map, with plenty of ways to become disorientated, but it's intensely satisfying, with plenty to keep your guns hot and heavy, and occasionally overheating. And it's so freaking cool, cruising through space to the iconic Star Wars score; this is everything a fan of the franchise should want to see, hear, and feel in a game honoured to carry such a title. In essence, everything we wanted.

Regardless of the side you inhabit, your ships vary a little in spec and abilities. And even if you naturally bend to one style more than another, don't be afraid of experimentation, particularly as your Battle Cards can make meaningful tweaks to your loadout. And once again, kills don't necessarily equate to prizes: *Battlefront II* cherishes objective play above all else, so you don't have to be the sharpest shooter in the sky to tally up the Battle Points. We're unsure of the longevity of it, though; without the expansive environmental opportunities available to planet-based backdrops, it's possible the rinse-and-repeatness of this mode will sour quickly. There's only so many times you can jump in a cockpit and do the same old thing, right?

CAMPAIGN STORY



Star Wars Battlefront II is, in many respects, EA demonstrating that it understands and appreciates the feedback it receives from its players. While much of the game is classic sequel fanfare – bigger, louder and bolder than its predecessor – it does, in many respects, feel like a direct response to the criticisms that were heaped on 2015's *Battlefront*; seen everywhere, from the introduction of the Galactic Assault and Star Battle modes, to the deeper customisation and longevity weaved through the back end of the player experience. But no more so is this evident than in the sprawling and cinematic campaign. Motive Studios, making its debut here, is unleashing a story that is set to have a huge impact on Star Wars cannon as it exists today – trusted to bridge the 30-year gap between *Return Of The Jedi* and *The Force Awakens*. It is ambitious and exciting, to say the least.

We've played through three chapters of the story. We have spent three hours in the company of Inferno Squad, the Imperial special forces team responsible for clearing up much of the mess made throughout the galactic civil war, and its leader Iden Versio – played wonderfully and vibrantly by actor Janina Gavankar. If one thing is clear from our time with the campaign it's that Motive is intent on releasing a Star Wars experience that delivers on the spectacle and thrills that made so many of the pivotal scenes from the cinematic universe reverberate for decades. Linear in design, the story is constructed as a way of Motive delivering everything from cramped stealth encounters to huge-scale space battles, smaller hero moments and sprawling battles across some pretty iconic Star Wars locations.

Developed in Frostbite 3, many of the same issues prevalent in everything from *Battlefield Hardline* to *Battlefield 1* have cropped up here. *Battlefront II* is, undoubtedly, one of the best-looking and sounding games of recent memory with a dizzying attention to detail, sickeningly slick in its construction and frame-rate. Of course, all of that comes at the cost of gun feedback; it can be difficult to get a sense of when you are hitting enemies during frantic firefights, while the 'gun feel' itself leaves little to be desired – this is an issue that pervades throughout the entire *Battlefront II* experience. That all said, it's certainly coming together to be an enjoyable entry into the Star Wars universe. It's an ambitious story attempting to fill in a very important place in the established cannon, introducing some incredibly constructed characters and well-delivered scenarios for us to stomp through. Whether it can achieve the heights of *Star Wars: Republic Commando* – the last in-universe game to feature a special forces game – remains to be seen, but we're confident that Motive is coming out of the gates strongly here.

Motive Studios has built a full campaign story into *Battlefront II* and it's certainly worth a play. It's going to become an important part of the Star Wars cannon moving forward.

THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF BATTLEFRONT II

THERE'S PLENTY TO SEE AND DO IN BATTLEFRONT II. BUT WHAT WERE THE HIGHS AND LOWS?

THE FORCE IS STRONG

GALACTIC ASSAULT
If you're looking to lose yourself in the ultimate Star Wars fantasy experience, then it's all about Galactic Assault. This huge, spectacular multiplayer mode is what Star Wars games were designed to deliver.

GRAPHICS AND AUDIO
We don't like to harp on about graphics, but *god damn Star Wars Battlefront II* looks incredible, seriously, as if you needed another reason to get on the 4K train.

THE CAMPAIGN
Telling an all-new story in the Star Wars universe, the campaign from Motive Studios is going to a welcomed, if not a little fluffy, distraction from the chaos of the multiplayer.

SPACE BATTLES
Space battles have finally arrived in *Battlefront II* and they are a welcomed addition. The ships have been excellently recreated and the sound design is, well, breathtaking. It's great.

PLAYING THE OBJECTIVE
The problem with multiplayer-focused games is that it relies on players playing it properly. For some reason, many players *still* can't get it into their heads that they need to play the objective.

LOOT BOXES
Having a progression system tied around randomised loot boxes is a pretty abhorrent practice. We aren't into it, and Qui-Gon Jinn wouldn't be either (and that matters because everybody knows he is the best Jedi).

LOW MIDI-CHLORIAN COUNT

TALKING SHOP WITH MOTIVE STUDIOS

MITCH DYER
WRITER, MOTIVE STUDIOS

CHRIS MATTHEWS
ART DIRECTOR, MOTIVE STUDIOS

***Battlefront II*'s campaign is set to take place between *Return Of The Jedi* and *The Force Awakens*, but how much freedom have you actually had to tell a brand-new story in that 30-year gap?**

Mitch Dyer We had a lot of freedom with the story. We were able to come to the table with original ideas, and ideas that we thought were maybe too much or too weird, and LucasFilm were all in. They were *super* enthusiastic and excited about our ideas, in our characters and our story, and in a way that was unexpected but absolutely welcomed by us.

Chris Matthews We get a lot from LucasFilm but, if you are going to touch something, it has to be pixel perfect to the models; we get access to the archives, we did photogrammetry on the models themselves. Our team isn't going to take all of the credit for that, as DICE built a lot of it, but we have lots of examples of it in our game… we get to leverage things that you recognise and use them to tell a story that has never been told until now. You'll get to see that in *Battlefront II*.

Where did you draw your inspiration form?

CM We just consumed everything. Every comic and novel, every film, every cartoon, every bit of Legends, and every Star Wars game. There are a lot of stories in there, but understanding it all just gives you a good basis to start. Ultimately, LucasFilm gave us everything we needed to draw on because they helped us create things that didn't exist before.

MD You just need to draw on everything and let it inspire you. Everything that Star Wars touches… it all comes from a place of passion. We all care about it so much. You just want to put your best foot forward and add these crazy awesome new things to the universe and we hope we can do that too, now that we are bringing our stuff in.

Is it intimidating to know that what you are creating here is becoming part of the Star Wars cannon now? That it could reverberate through the books, comics, and even the films later down the line?

MD: I had that realisation very recently actually. I think it's because we are at the end of development… it's becoming time to send *Battlefront II* out into the world. Now it is part of Star Wars. The places and the people that we touch onto in our story, all of these events happened during a crucial period in time. If somebody is navigating those waters [in other Star Wars media] they will now have to account for them as a Star Wars storyteller. *Battlefront II* is a part of Star Wars.

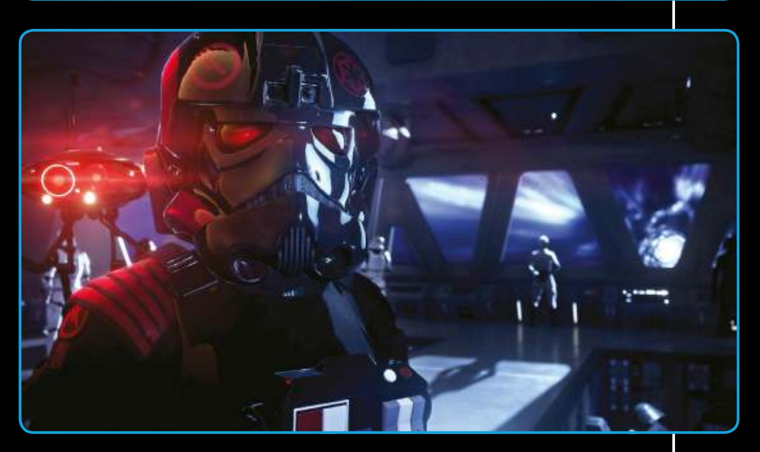
***Battlefront II* will be returning to iconic locations, such as Endor, how much freedom have you had to tinker with them to better suit your gameplay ambitions?**

CM If you take a place like Endor, there are some well-trodden pieces of that terrain that are very close to the films – you saw those on *Battlefront* 2015. So [instead] we go to a location that you've kind of only seen on a horizon – glimpsed at when the dish explodes. We got given the freedom to change the terrain up slightly; it's a lot more hilly, you see waterfalls, added new elements and then we get to leverage parts that you'll recognise, like the landing pads – the Imperial forces built them all over Endor but that story has never really been told until now, and you'll get to see that in our story.

MD We get to add a lot of stuff that makes sense for the period of time that we are in. The original trilogy, with *Rogue One* bumping up against it, it was nice that U-Wings were available to us, and it makes sense that, okay, of course the rebels are going to drop off troops [on Endor] after the Death Star has exploded because what's their next step? Get on the ground and clear up the Empire; we know they had bases here so lets finish them off and get them out of here. You know in that situation that U-Wings are going to make the most sense. It's nice to be able to have the details like that added in to a specific level.







FINAL VERDICT

Star Wars Battlefront II is a huge improvement over its predecessor, with a few strange curiosities thrown in for good measure. The addition of space battles, galactic assault and a full campaign mode – not to mention deeper combat and expansive classes – has ensured that this will be one hell of a package when it launches on 17 November 2017. There are concerns, once again, surrounding the game's longevity and staying power, although we are eager to see whether DICE can respond to the concerns raised out of the beta regarding its progression system, the loot boxes and some the point scoring methodology on its game mode ahead of launch. *Battlefront II* is spectacular in so many ways, but whether it has the substance to keep that feeling intact long after launch remains to be seen.

FLATOUT 4
TOTAL INSANITY











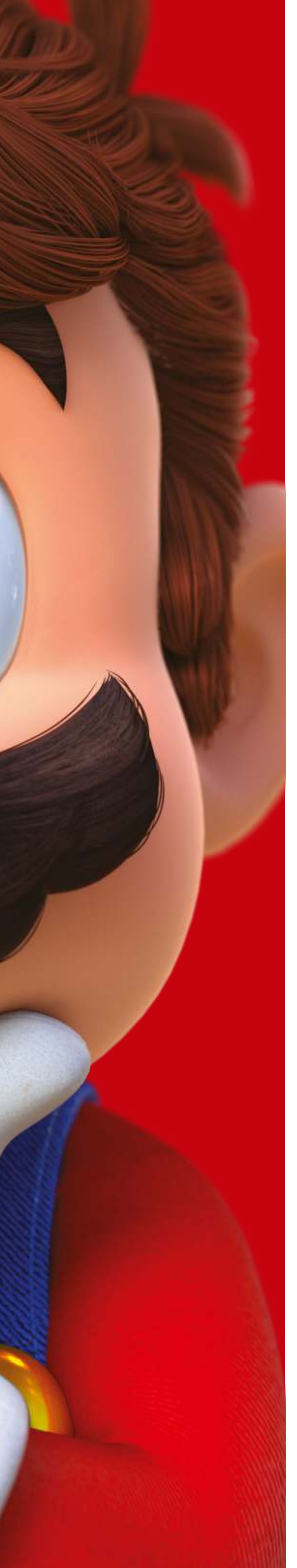
Reviews



64

SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY

Has Nintendo's merry mascot weaved his magic once again?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and, of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.

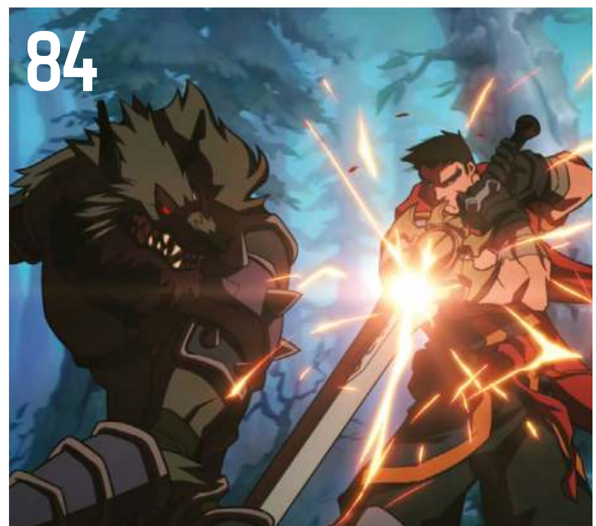












AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

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BEING A PARAGOOMBA OR WIGGLER IS SO UTTERLY FOREIGN THAT IT'S A BIT OF A REVELATION

MARIO THE PACIFIST

It's a smaller point in the overall experience of *Super Mario Odyssey*, but there's something to be said for the paradigm shift of utilising the skills and embodying the existence of the rogues gallery of Mario villains from down the years, rather than finding ways to destroy all of them. It may not be the focus of the game by any means, but we can't help but feel that the slight shift in objective gives the overall game more of a friendly, welcoming feel. We're betting that after you walk a mile in the boots of a Goomba you'll feel a little differently about leaping onto its head and squishing it. That this game can make the animals and enemies of this world feel so much more alive is just one minor triumph among many.





A JOURNEY LIKE NO OTHER

Super Mario Odyssey

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Nintendo EPD
PRICE: £41.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Left: Visually this is an immensely impressive-looking game, although Nintendo has actually been doing some fine work in this regard for some time. It's in the finer details that you'll see the true brilliance, though, like the 3D-printed texturing of some bonus stages.





Left: We won't spoil too many of the retro references in the game, but suffice to say that exploration will bring rewards to any fans of Mario's 8-bit era in particular. And keep an eye out for boomboxes, too, as they play new versions of classic Mario tunes.

There is something miraculous about *Super Mario Odyssey*. The joy of it is inescapable. Perhaps we could have said much the same about a number of Mario titles over the years, but this one just keeps delivering over and over and over, and each time with a new twist or element that elevates each experience from the last. Just when you think *Super Mario Odyssey* has given you its peak moment of happiness or nostalgia or nerve-jangling challenge, it has another one up its sleeve.

So, clearly we have been impressed with Mario's latest offering and at the time of writing we still haven't stopped playing. The story has long been completed, but as we approach 300 Power Moons we're not even halfway through gathering that particular collectible. It may seem odd to begin talking about this new Mario release by discussing its post-story longevity, but the depth of content and the variety of it that lasts hours and days past the final chapter of the typically light story speaks to the overall creativity of the project. Power Moons, purple coins, coins in general for buying costumes, music files, recurring characters and more all need to be sought out if you want to be an *Odyssey* completionist. And there's a very good chance you will want to be because Nintendo has excelled at making each one of these small elements really fun and engaging.

Whether the challenges to find these items are born of new concepts, fun combinations of well-trodden ideas or steeped in Mario nostalgia, there are very few in the game that do not make you smile, laugh or feel a shiver of recognition or excitement. As you delve deeper into the post-game of *Odyssey* the more nostalgic elements rise to the surface, a reward perhaps for franchise fans who are typically the most committed to finding every secret and collectible a 3D Mario title has to offer. Simultaneously the difficulty begins to rise, but we'll get into that shortly.

Let's go back to the beginning proper and the core of what is new and innovative about *Super Mario Odyssey*, because that's ultimately what's going to draw you in and get you motoring through this pretty epic adventure. Narratively, as we've suggested, this is as light as you would expect with Peach in the clutches of Bowser once again and Mario forced to chase his airship around the globe, gathering up enough Power Moons to keep his ship, the Odyssey, moving to the next location. In reality, it's a globe-trotting adventure where engaging in the local customs and cultures rewards you with Moons, money and collectibles, enriching your understanding and appreciation for Mario's world. And it is his world, as while we had pondered the relative location of this adventure against the Mushroom Kingdom and Mario's other favourite haunts prior to release, it turns out this is his home planet after all, just not as we've ever had the chance to experience it previously. And what a wonderfully wild world it is, packed full of peculiar characters and opportunities to reinterpret 20 years of 3D Mario game design. The most prominent shift is obviously the capture mechanic that allows Mario to 'possess' characters in the game and adopt their abilities. The idea of Mario becoming these strange creatures seems like a nice amusement at first, but it's actually so much more than that. While they do offer a nice break from the clearly familiar mechanics of this game (you'll be triple-jumping within five minutes of the start of the game) they also offer a genuine change of mindset. Being a Paragoomba or Wiggler is so utterly foreign, the feel of playing as them so altered from the baseline we've been learning since 1996, that it's a bit of a revelation. Each new vessel offers its challenges and rewards and makes you rethink the layouts of the level around you.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

RETRO RESPECT: While references to Mario's previous adventures were not uncommon in past releases, *Odyssey* embraces everything about the character's history from his moveset to the 2D platforming sections of the game.

Let's take Goombas as an example, the very first enemy we faced in *Super Mario Bros.*, who haven't changed a great deal over the years in terms of their appearance or moveset, except in instances when they have a pair of wings stuck to them. As a Goomba you can waddle along, you can jump a little, but not as high as Mario can on his own and you can be hurt by

other Goombas who recognise you as an interloper. However, you can stack them. Jump on the head of a Goomba as one of their kind and you control them both. Jump on more and a tower of Goombas is gradually formed, giving you access to all sorts of ledges or items that would otherwise be out of reach. And as you move, the Goomba tower leans ever so slightly under its teetering weight. And you get the same kind of fun, peculiar mechanics or interactions with each possessed creature in the game. The Hammer Bros. are another fantastic example as they bounce around rather than walking, making movement precarious on tight ledges, but they also have a forgiving and high leap that means you can jump halfway off a ledge and still make it.

Which brings us onto the subject of movement, which we wanted to spend a moment praising *Super Mario Odyssey* for, although it could well be extended to many Mario games over the years. Something we don't talk about enough with games, except in the negative context, is the weight of how a character feels in the world. They can feel floaty, they can feel plodding. They can have too much inertia, making running and leaping at worst inaccurate and at best unpredictable. This can be covered up with additional mechanics and action rather smartly, disguising inconsistencies. *Super Mario Odyssey* has no such facades at its disposal given how essential to the experience Mario's movement is to the overall experience.

And so it's a remarkable thing that time after time this series delivers a feel to its hero's movement that is both grounded within the world, responsive to your commands and adaptable to new parameters. *Super Mario Odyssey* is one of the most transformative and experimental titles in this series we have ever seen, and yet Mario's moves are so familiar. Every footfall has purpose, every turn is sharp, he floats in the air with ease, adjusting to your subtle directional inputs. And then he turns into a frog or Goomba or Hammer Bros. and the weight, inertia and responsiveness shifts to something just slightly off but still predictable and consistent. Suddenly you're over steering or finding greater limitations in your lateral movement. You have a whole set of parameters to consider and exploit, and in this way the game remains fresh and surprising.

Mario himself has never been better represented and personified than in this game, and that's saying something for a character who has been brimming with personality, certainly since the time you could pull his rubber face around in *Mario 64*. The way he reacts to the local weather in the game, yawns as he waits for you to act (then lays down for a bit of a rest), leans into his turns, how his nose wobbles as he runs, how he yells with delight as he pulls off a somersault leap; it all adds more and more layers onto his persona and makes him a delight to spend time with. And every world feels built to exploit and exemplify that. *Super Mario Odyssey* really is a series of playgrounds, giving you the space to play with your possibilities and hunt out rewards at every turn. These are levels that reward experimentation and curiosity. These are worlds where you'll spot something you want to do and find 30 minutes later that you have only just gotten around to doing it because you got distracted with five other things first. Two of the locations that probably best exemplify this are the long anticipated New Donk City and the more mysterious Tostarena. The home of Mayor Pauline is everything we could have hoped for in terms of gameplay possibilities. The tall and closely positioned buildings make a perfect location for wall-jumping, the heights offer a sense of peril that is not insignificant in a game

TOSTARENA KEEPS OPENING ITSELF UP TO YOU WITH NEW SECRETS EVERY TIME YOU RETURN

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
We'd say about 15-20 hours on your first playthrough.

Q. ANY REPLAY VALUE?
Tons. The game opens up even more after the credits roll.

Q. IS IT SERIOUSLY THAT GOOD?
Hell yes, it is.



Right: *Super Mario Odyssey* features a smattering of motion controls that offer some additional moves and assists that are otherwise unavailable to you in the game. Throwing Cappy upwards or homing in on enemies are a couple of examples.







Above: You can fill up the inside of the Odyssey with souvenirs from your travels, although they must all be bought with the local purple currency. Right: Mario has always been a bit of a clothes horse, but the number of outfits in this game is kind of insane. Many are callbacks to his appearances across multiple titles in the past, particular when he was shoehorned into titles as Nintendo's mascot to give them added value.

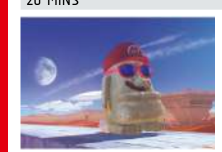


Below: The water-based worlds of *Odyssey* are among the most beautiful, but also still probably the weakest. Becoming a Cheep Cheep makes life a lot easier.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

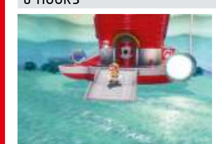
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

20 MINS



You should have been introduced to most of the key moves by this point and perhaps even visited a couple of locations, giving you a good look at the variety that's on offer.

6 HOURS



The whirlwind tour is well on course and you've collected power moons across several kingdoms now. Now's the time when you can start to experiment with hat move combos a little.

10 DARK NIGHTS

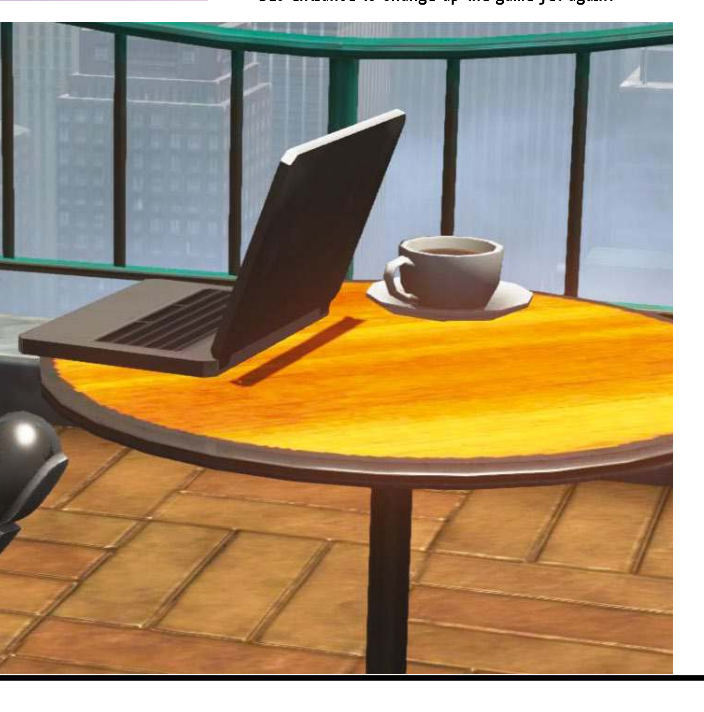


Game long completed, but all of those Power Moons, purple coins and pieces of music, not to mention all the souvenirs, remain elusive to us. The hunt for them continues.



PRIME FOR EXPANSION

We've yet to hear any confirmation on whether Nintendo is planning DLC for *Super Mario Odyssey*, but all of the ingredients appear to be there for some major additions to this game over time if it is so inclined. For a start, while each world is named as a Kingdom, the area you spend time in is usually separately named as a single location, suggesting that other locations could be accessible in close proximity. Secondly, the very structure of the game, of exploring the globe and travelling to new countries, seems well designed for extensions to the story or new challenges to be introduced. Third, there are plenty of hints and references to other Mario characters and experiences that aren't in the game. Could some old pals make a DLC entrance to change up the game yet again?



where death is rarely a major concern, and the general lack of enemies (in comparison with some other worlds) means its primary interest is in hidden objects and doors. Tostarena, on the other hand, might be our favourite world in the game, because it just keeps opening itself up to you with new secrets every time you return. While the rolling sand dunes disguise all sorts of hidden gems between them, the underground sections of the game are classic Mario through and through and it has some of the most fun transitions from 3D to 2D platforming in the game. It also houses one of the game's best bosses, a possible homage to Eyerok from *Super Mario 64*.

On the subject of bosses, this is perhaps the only area where we would say *Super Mario Odyssey* is a mixed bag, but even that must come with caveats. Bowser's minions of choice this time are the Broodals, a family of wedding-planning bunnies who seem dead set on delaying Mario every step of the way with their own magic hats. They are really the weakest boss fights in the game, although some combined appearances in the later stages offer greater interest. Bosses like Knucklotec in Tostarena are far more traditional in their design, size and ingenuity and so work a lot better. The caveat is that in the post game all of these bosses are seemingly replayable with all sorts of modifiers added, increasing the difficulty and giving you more to think about. We won't say too much about the ultimate showdown, except that while it may not be tail-swingingly good, it might actually have something even better as a reward to compensate.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MOTION MASTERY: There a whole of bunch of moves locked behind the Joy-Con remotes being used in a detached state and while that frustrated us at first, it didn't last for long. First, the game's great to play with light motion mechanics, and second it's perfectly playable without these additional moves.

And as we said, that post-game support is very impressive, not just in terms of the immense number of things to collect, which could have been a rather hollow hoarding endeavour, but in the way new levels and trials are added that are harder and more involved than what you've experienced before. Platforming stages offer new obstacles or trickier surfaces, possessing enemies means navigating more complex corridors or threats that are unique to those creatures. It just goes on and on and on. So while in terms of scale *Super Mario Odyssey* might not have the sweeping vistas of *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild*, it certainly doesn't lack for content.

And so really the score that this game is getting should be pretty obvious. We don't give out tens lightly, but we have to ask, what more could we have wanted from this game? What could it have offered that would have made it better? The answer is not much. Playing *Super Mario Odyssey* is to experience pure joy. We couldn't wish for anything more than that from this series or from Nintendo.

VERDICT 10/10
ANOTHER MARIO MARVEL

DOMINATING MORDOR, ONE FORTRESS AT A TIME

Middle-earth: Shadow of War

There's no doubt about it, Tolkien is spinning in his grave. What started as a slow rotation – it's difficult to pinpoint how this strange phenomenon began exactly, though some will attribute it to the posthumous completion of the Silmarillion, others (more correctly) to the creation of the Hobbit trilogy of films – has now erupted into something far more uncontrollable, violent even. The inertia of the coffin now generating such centrifugal force that Tolkien has likely found himself on a one-way journey to the centre of the earth, to the domain of the Balrog – that one is on Monolith. *Middle-earth: Shadow Of War* plays fast and loose with the mythology and established intricacies of The Lord Of The Rings universe, crashing into the boundaries outlined in the books with all the poise and grace of a drunken, rampaging Tom Bombadil (yeah, we went there). And you know what, that's okay. No really, it is. *Shadow Of War* might not do *right* by Tolkien's creations, but it sure has some fun in the world he created.

If you've got the time, then *Shadow Of War* will bring the fun – that's the pact you enter into with Monolith as you look to hook back up with the perpetually sullen Talion and your ghost pal Celebrimbor, flexing the power of the Bright Lord in a domineering fashion with an all-new ring of power. Don't question it; roll with it. Set in the decaying no man's land between The Hobbit and The Lord Of The Rings you just have to trust that it's going to get a little weird in Mordor; that Shelob is now a sexualised spider-lady and that the place where Orcs are birthed may actually have been randomised loot boxes this whole time – Tolkien never got around to detailing those peculiar intricacies, but we digress.

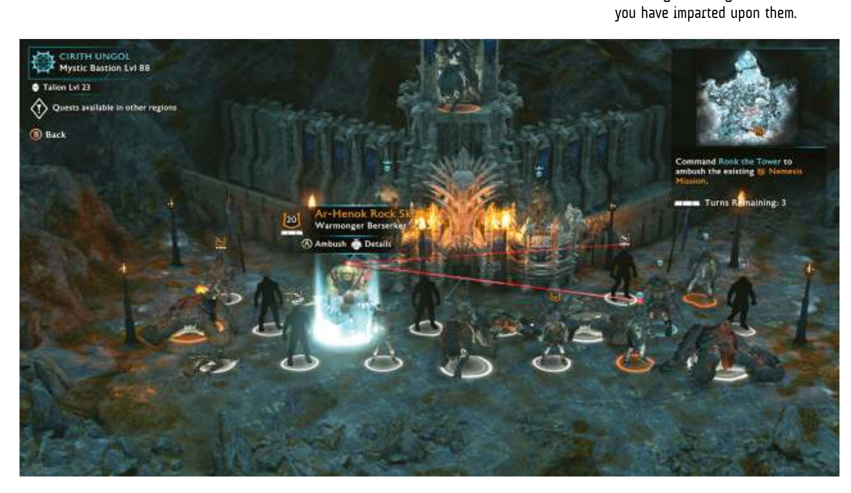
If you are willing to embrace the chaos – to accept that the details are best left to the pages of the Fantasy Bible itself – and enjoy a whirlwind tour of Mordor, stomping through famous strongholds and decapitating an endless sea of enemy aggressors as you do, well, you're going to have a great time. *Shadow Of War* is everything that you could ever want from a sequel. It's bigger, and louder and expands on just about everything that Monolith set out to do with 2014's *Shadow Of Mordor*, retaining much of what made that release special to begin with. It frequently stumbles in its pursuit of monstrous expansion, too – an extraordinary mess of systems and features, of map markers and quirky UI decisions, of abhorrent main missions and unnecessary additions. But *Shadow Of War* is at its best when it embraces its absurdity, in spite of its failings. The procedural nature of the Nemesis System has only grown; Monolith's incredible, proprietary, method of building an endless wave of personalised enemy encounters – of generating new stories and adventures without hesitation – still excuses many of the sticking points you are likely to encounter.

Shadow Of War is the kind of game that you can easily get lost in, in the sense that it will consume hours of your life without you

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros.
DEVELOPER: Monolith Productions
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

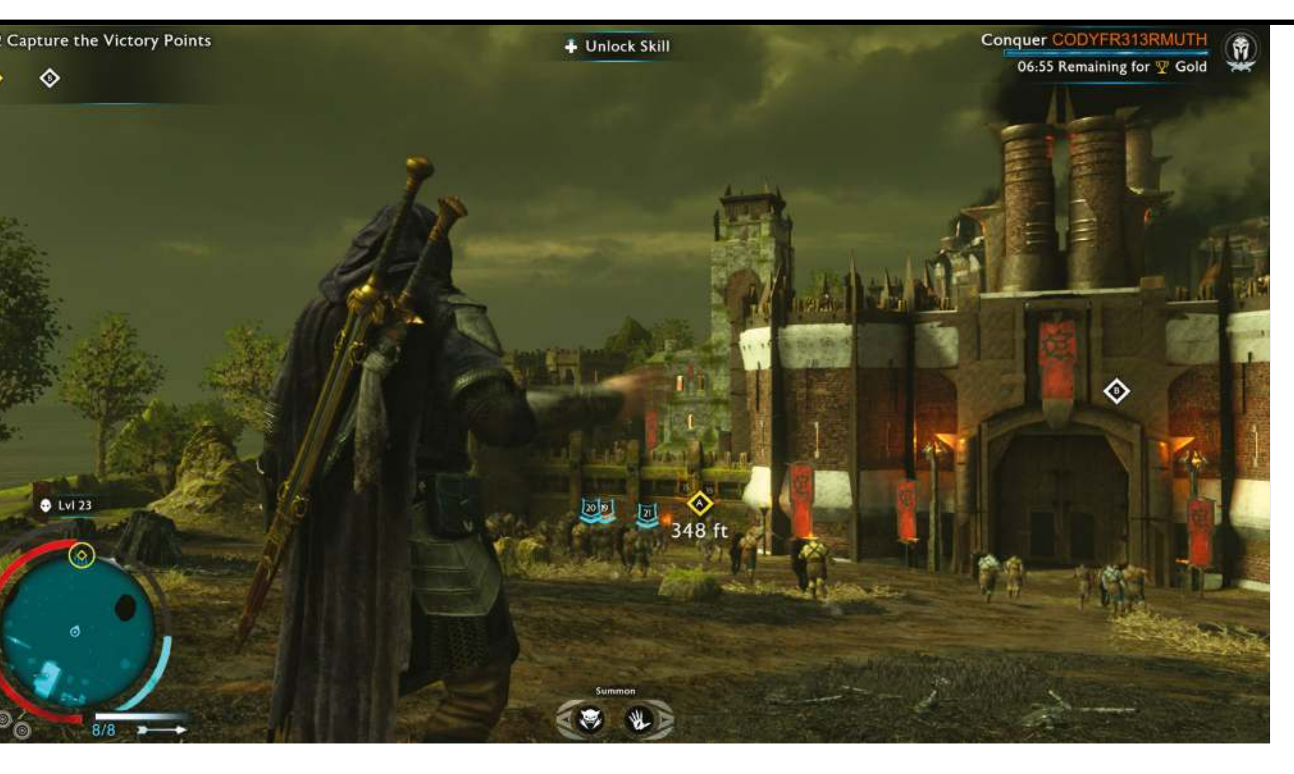
Right: Everybody will emerge with their own stories from *Shadow Of War*, that's what makes it special. Tales of how one Orc kept returning from the dead, learning and adapting from the ways in which you cut them down – looking to take revenge following the disfigurations you have imparted upon them.



Above: The best bits of *Shadow Of War* are the ones that feel like they are unique to you and your version of Mordor. Forget the plodding story and the scripted cutscenes, it's the insane concoctions of the Nemesis System that make this game spring to life.

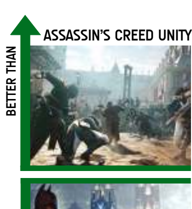
Above: Because of the Nemesis System, each of the powerful Orcs you encounter in the world – the Captains, Warchiefs and other ranked enemies – have distinct and memorable personalities, quirks and, yes, even memories. They remember everything, and sometimes that can come to haunt you beyond the grave.

IF YOU'VE GOT THE TIME, THEN SHADOW OF WAR WILL BRING THE FUN – THAT'S THE PACT YOU ENTER INTO WITH MONOLITH



BETTER THAN

ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY



AS GOOD AS



BATMAN: ARKHAM ORIGINS

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?

Honestly, too long. *Shadow Of War* could have done with being a bit leaner.

Q. FOR REAL?

It takes a minimum of ten hours for the game to even cover all of the basics and settle down. There's a lot to get your head around here.

Q. BUT THAT STORY…?

No. Just ignore the story. You have to. The main mission is dour and a bit of a drag, which is a shame given the fun of everything else around it.



FREE-FLOW COMBAT

While much of your time will be spent recruiting every Orcish leader you meet to your cause (or breaking them into submission, should they refuse) you'll also expend a hell of a lot of energy in combat. Killing Orcs is what Talion does best, and a return of *Shadow Of Mordor*'s free-flowing combat system is welcomed. In one-on-one situations, there's a degree of tactical positioning and tempered aggression to consider, these battles see *Shadow Of War* at its most considered. It is, however, at its best when you are pushed to battle dozens upon dozens of Orcs at once – a stressful, thrilling, act of crowd control. The frame-rate can dip a little here on Xbox One – and expect to encounter a few issues with bugs and clipping – but for the most part it's these battles that make the game feel truly alive.



being any the wiser, and also in that the muted brown hues of many of its sprawling hub areas don't make for easy visual navigation. Nor do the seemingly endless webs of sub-menus, skill trees and upgrade systems. While the main quest is as stone-faced as the game's protagonist, the playfulness derived from the Nemesis System more than makes up for it.

"Ranger!" you'll hear all too frequently as you stomp through the various contained areas of Mordor, the war cry for an entertaining engagement just minutes from erupting. Each and every enemy generated through the Nemesis System has their own personality, their own quirks, fighting style and memories to contend with. A few will be memorable, pervading through your game world for hours upon hours: Uluk The Machine, for example, becoming more disfigured and increasingly pissed off with every decapitation we could throw in his direction – a formidable foe by the time he took his seat at the top of a fortress in his ultimate gambit for revenge.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

EXPANDED NEMESIS The Nemesis System is still the crown jewel of the experience here, offering an almost endless array of entertaining enemies to fight and belittle.

It's these kind of randomised encounters that only make *Shadow Of War* most impressive – with respect to both playability and visual fidelity – aspects truly shine: the fortress sieges. Each area has a fortress to invade, a set of war chiefs and over lords sit in defence of it. How you approach it is up to you – do you spend time invading the organisation and planting spies behind enemy ranks? Do you waste hours away in the hub building and training your own army of Orcs through a myriad of challenges and multi-faceted Nemesis encounters? Do you just trust that Shag The Raven has your back after you spent the better part of a weekend pushing for his recruitment through a unique blend of blood, bruising and shame – or will he turn to betray you at a pivotal moment sealing your defeat? If we've learned anything it is this: Shag The Raven *always* has your back.

Shadow Of War can too often be at odds with itself. While it's huge and complex in many of its systems, it still feels as if it is caught in 2014. Combat is smoother, but much more of the same; movement and environment traversal is still magnetic in its execution and the pace can too quickly swing between furiously engaging and rote. But then it's easy to overlook all of this as you crash in to yet another over-the-top monologue from an Orc with a flair for the dramatic as you storm a fortress with your favourite warriors by your side. And you may casually wonder whether Tolkien had envisioned Sauron's armies getting a good old-fashioned ass-kicking from a grave-walking Gondorian, an ageing ghost Elf, and an array of Shakespearean mind-controlled orcs. We can only hope he had planned it this way from the beginning.

VERDICT 7/10

MORDOR AS YOU'VE NEVER EXPERIENCED IT BEFORE

THE BEAUTY IN BRUTALITY

Cuphead

Studio MDHR's debut is unapologetic in everything that it attempts and achieves; in its style, its design and, all-importantly, in its execution, *Cuphead* knows what it wants to be and strives for it without hesitation. Studio MDHR has never wavered in its resolve to craft something so uniquely out of time, and it has done so without, astoundingly, succumbing to the pitfalls of playing to nostalgia – as so many other modern genre games are want to do. Everything *Cuphead* does, it does within reason and with purpose, and it's all the better because of it.

The art style, a scintillating homage to the cartoons that emerged out of Fleischer Studios in the late Twenties and early Thirties, isn't there as a mere aesthetic treat, it feeds directly into every aspect of *Cuphead*'s being. The world and everything that inhabits it is a warped mirror facing against the real world: familiar, but out of focus, distorted but ever in sight; a hallucinatory nightmare that ensures every single one of *Cuphead*'s boss fights, characters and encounters are as incredible to behold, visually, as they are surprising to engage with. *Cuphead* revels in the insanity of the pre-Hays Code era of animation to incredible effect – you've never played or seen anything quite like this before, and, given the years of tireless work that has gone into producing it, you likely won't see again.

The action has been given the same treatment. While much of the attention was, rightfully so, on the art style and animation in the run up to release – every frame of the game hand-drawn, inked and animated, a herculean task by any modern standard – we are happy to report that the same excruciating attention to every detail has been paid to the moment-to-moment play. *Cuphead* was designed in homage to the likes of *Contra III*, *Gunstar Heroes* and the Thunder Force game series: run-and-gun and shoot-'em-up games that are remembered for their escalating challenge as much as they are their succinct, syncopated rhythm to play. Studio MDHR recreates this dutifully whilst shedding many of the technical limitations that hampered the genre classics on reflection, ensuring that

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Game Studios
DEVELOPER: Studio MDHR
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



FAQs

Q. IS IT SUPER HARD?
It's pretty challenging, but it isn't impossible to beat.

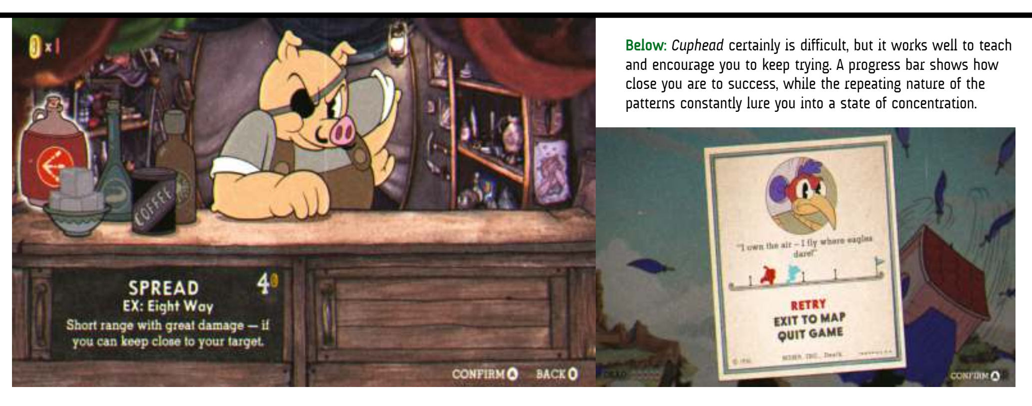
Q. ARE YOU LYING?
We aren't saying you won't get stuck, but, you know, it won't make you want to rip your hair out.

Q. WE'RE ON TO YOU.
So long as you know how to run, jump and occasionally parry you'll be fine. You can't blame us if you suck at games, okay? Okay.



YOU'VE NEVER PLAYED OR SEEN ANYTHING QUITE LIKE THIS BEFORE





Below: *Cuphead* certainly is difficult, but it works well to teach and encourage you to keep trying. A progress bar shows how close you are to success, while the repeating nature of the patterns constantly lure you into a state of concentration.

Above: Upgrades and new abilities can be purchased from Porkrind, the roaming shopkeeper who accepts gold coins found hidden out in the overworld and inside of the platforming, run-and-gun sections of the game. **Left:** *Cuphead* finds a killer balance between its stunning hand-drawn animations and its challenging combat, utilising the former to enhance the style and substance of the latter.

Cuphead's retrograde action straddles the line between familiar and fresh throughout.

The centrepiece of the experience is in the 17 main boss battles, each to be fought and conquered so that Cuphead – and his brother, Mugman, should you have a local co-op partner to hand – can walk up to the devil with a stack of contractually earned souls in hand and use them to escape the hell that has befallen them – don't gamble, kids.

Each boss is a spectacle, a taunting foe that punishes pride and rewards resilience; *Cuphead* is a challenge, that much should be clear by the furore that erupted around its release, but it isn't impossible to learn or play. Every boss comes equipped with multiple phases, the insanity unfolding as you dodge incoming attacks (as impossible as that may seem at times), steer clear of environmental dangers and return fire in an aggressively curious fashion – chipping away at an invisible health bar as you do.

It's in these boss battles where Studio MDHR leverages its art style as an honest to god asset, in a way that precious few studios are able to replicate. Anything could happen in a pre-Hays Code-era cartoon, and that's a large part of what makes each of these fights so exhilarating to behold; when literally everything on screen can transform into a weapon, when the weapons themselves can evolve into different types of weapons, there's a thrill of discovery that pushes you through the heartache of near constant defeat.

It's funny, because in reality each of *Cuphead*'s bosses take just minutes to take down – not that you'll ever manage to beat one first time through, though. You live and learn through a process of repetition, learning a new tactic – and with it gaining a new sense of accomplishment – with each attempt, a progress bar that displays upon your failure acts as a perpetual tease as to how close you were to completion each and every time.

Cuphead is clever in that it is consistent. While some bosses may have multiple, randomised, phases up its sleeves, there's (almost) always a way to make it through the mess of bullets filling the screen – although it does, on occasion, drift a little too far into bullet hell territory, making some hit boxes difficult to strike. There's an ideal way to make it through unscathed, and the game does its best to put the onus of education on you to figure it out. The smooth 60 frames per second action, wrapped in a luscious 30-frame animation consistent with era appropriate animation, ensures that you are never fighting against the game itself in an effort to succeed – the exaggerated art ensuring you are able to clearly distinguish between flourish and boss tells of any upcoming attacks.

New weapons and abilities are unlocked at a rapid pace, allowing for further experimentation should you find yourself stuck. Cuphead can, at any one time, carry two weapons, a bonus, and a special attack – in certain fights the right loadout can make all the difference. These can all be purchased by finding hidden gold coins in the gorgeous overworld, or by completing six short and sweet "Run 'N Gun" platforming sections – short distractions from the gauntlet of irresistible bosses.

Cuphead is wonderful. It has occasional sticking points – the final run of boss battles can, for example, be a little rough around the edges, especially as they abandon the otherwise scintillating rhythm and pattern design that holds the rest of the game up so impeccably. But any complaints we could leverage at *Cuphead* are markedly small, especially when weighted against what it has been able to achieve. It's challenging, beautiful and unique.

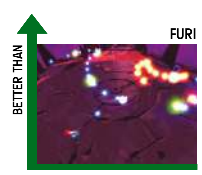
FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

LOOKS TO KILL: The devil is in the detail with *Cuphead*, with Studio MDHR paying as much attention to its wild artwork and animation as it has the core game mechanics.



BETTER THAN

FURI





WORSE THAN

GUNSTAR HEROES



CO-OPERATIVE CHAOS

Cuphead lets you bring a friend into the action, with player two dropping in as Mugman. The game is a hell of a lot of fun in co-op. It's the sort of chaotic action that almost demands noise from both players, and anybody watching, for any progress to be made. While a second player does mean you are able to keep the fight going for a little longer – parrying the ghost of your KO'd partner before they drift off the screen brings you back to life with one HP – the boss battles are actually a little trickier with two players running around. The screen real estate is limited, to say the least, and things can get pretty cluttered with two characters running and jumping around projectiles and between platforms in the middle of the boss battles.


VERDICT 8/10
MICROSOFT'S TRUE STANDOUT EXCLUSIVE FOR 2017

DINOSAUR MOUNTS, NEED WE SAY ANYMORE?

Total War: Warhammer II

Creative Assembly is kind of frustrating, really. It's built up such a name for itself producing Total War that each time a new one comes along it's hard to build up to our usually default level of cynicism to even pretend it'll be a flop. That's not to say the developer hasn't dropped the ball from time to time, but it's not like any of its more recent Total War releases have been complete disasters. So aside from a few nit-picking Total War devotees, it's hard to find too much fault or major criticism in Creative Assembly; its consistency – and by virtue that of its most significant franchise – is something of a rarity in the industry: it's reliable. Imagine if Call Of Duty was a certainty, that it was a guaranteed achievement each year, would it still create the buzz that it still continues to earn? It's unlikely. Perhaps this seems as though we're suggesting that Creative Assembly is a company resting on its laurels, and that's most certainly not true; *Warhammer II* is surefire proof of that. The studio could've phoned it in, it could've pushed out a new map with a new campaign and not given it a second thought – and let's face it, Total War is a franchise that kind of relishes in 'more of the same' – but it hasn't. *Warhammer II* isn't a considerable change to its predecessor, but that's primarily because its predecessor was already an incredibly strong entry. All Creative Assembly could do was tweak and answer some of the concerns of its fanbase – the ones who likely aren't bothering with such formalities as reviews, anyway – to provide the most complete Warhammer package it could.

And, well, that's what it's done. The biggest improvement comes by way of the campaign, which now has a unified goal across all four of

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Creative Assembly
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
MINIMUM SPEC: 64-bit OS, Dual-core 3.0GHz CPU, 5GB RAM, 1GB GPU, 60GB disk space
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

IT'S NOT A RADICAL SHIFT FROM THE GAME THAT CAME BEFORE, BUT IT'S STILL ONE OF THE BEST TOTAL WAR GAMES YET



Above: The aesthetic is perhaps the most surprising change for the Total War franchise. Gone are the European environs of previous games, this time with a tinge of the Americas. Expect to see Mayan temples, lush jungles and lizards riding dinosaurs.
Below: The rat-like Skaven are perhaps one of the more interesting options for the game, decaying everything – including their own empire – in their wake. It can be quite a surprise to enter a location only to discover it's a ratty haven.

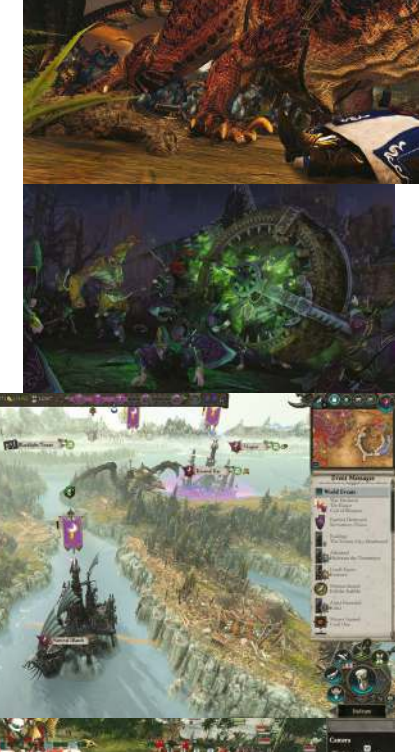
FAQs

Q. THE CRITICISM?
Well the diplomatic AI continues to let the side down, far too obviously driven by behind-the-scenes numbers.

Q. ANYTHING ELSE?
It's rather obviously built to accommodate future DLC, which will result in a better game – as was the case for the original – but designing that way is a little cynical.

Q. SUCH AS?
There are areas of the map that seem to clearly suggest some of Games Workshop's less familiar factions will be turning up. Though some may well be free DLC.

Left: It's unlikely the individuality of each faction's units will cater for all inter-race playstyle preferences, but it does mean that there's more reason to try out each campaign at least once. How this will play out in multiplayer will require a couple of months for it to settle first. Below: The use of flying mounts, large beasts and hero units is, of course, just as integral to battlefield success, but they're not nearly as game-changing as they were.



Below: The Dark Elves can make use of these floating cities, that can even bombard enemies in the battlefield.

the game's factions. Here, the aim is to either take control of or secure a Great Vortex located in the campaign map of Ulthuan, and while the methods may change dependent on the faction you've chosen, this is the MacGuffin you'll be hunting. Put this way it's hardly the most compelling of objectives, but it's enough to turn what was more of a sandbox experience with the original into something with a little more drive and a little more pressure. It's built in a greater sense of narrative that was mostly surface-level in the last game and feels a little more crafted as a result, perhaps even more than any Total War game before it. But this overarching goal also gives it a new direction that doesn't commonly feel a part of the franchise. In fact, it's more akin to the Civilization series in that sense, as though you're taking part in any of that game's non-conquest driven races. It's not solely about sheer force now, not only about overcoming the enemy with guile and strength until they are no more, but instead about keeping one eye on the machinations of warfare and another on the horizon for that swirling vortex.

Perhaps most impressive of all, however, is just how much content there is to see in this campaign map. Considering the short time between releases, you'd be forgiven for thinking that – as we alluded to earlier – Creative Assembly would've likely been better off flinging out a new map and having been done with it. Yet not only is this campaign map bigger (and considerably so) than its earlier counterpart, but each of the four (five if you count the pre-order DLC) factions are completely new. On a developmental level this means the studio has somehow fit in five completely new sets of 3D models, animations and all that nonsense in a shorter space of time than the previous game, but on a gameplay level it means there's so much more for you to enjoy. While the new races do share some similarities with the last game's options – the Skaven are sort of similar to the Beastmen, High Elves like the Empire – they are still each distinct enough to give a great deal of replayability, perhaps even more than the series is typically known for. In fact, that's one of the greatest accomplishments of the sequel, building on the race individuality both on and off the battlefield and adding to it tenfold. The core systems still work the same, but how those units perform is far more tailored to their race. Lizardmen can struggle controlling their dino-mounts, for example, while the Skaven seek to poison and lay waste to as much as they can. This uniqueness carries over to the campaign map too, as you might expect, where the High Elves favour diplomacy and the Dark Elves employ a bloodlust that works on a need for aggression, not unlike the Greenskins of the first game. And better than all that is the fact that there isn't a clear advantage to either, stepping over the bigger issue with the original by ensuring every faction starts on the same foot. Some factions are harder to play than others, not because they lack a sufficient counter but because their underlying mechanics require a little more preparation, planning and patience.

And that's pretty much the kind of evolution this is. It's not a radical shift from the game that came before, but then that was never something anyone was expecting. There's a ton of smaller changes that would just be too long to list – the improved UI, better implementation of magic, or greater variety of missions, to name a few – and a handful of criticisms that seem to carry over from most Total War games. But at the same time it's easily one of the best Total War experiences yet, which in turn makes it one of the best RTS games available.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

CLASS WARFARE: The first game was right to utilise the individuality of each race, but now the factions have much more of an identity on the battlefield without one side having a clear advantage.

WHILE STOCKS LAST

By the time you read this, you'll have missed out on the opportunity to play the Norsca faction for free, a barbaric human race that was available without charge for anyone who preordered or bought *Warhammer II* on the first week. This is a continuing trend for the Total War series, and not one that has any fans. It's fair to say that, despite its efforts, the original *Total War: Warhammer* did have a messy launch, but a string of updates and free and paid-DLC helped iron out those issues. Now, however, it seems that's the de facto approach for Creative Assembly that could set a worrying precedent. This doesn't affect the game as it is now, of course, but knowing it isn't going to be the full package may well deter you from buying until a complete set is on sale on Steam.

BETTER THAN

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER





WORSE THAN

XCOM 2



IT'D BE HARD TO GO BACK TO THE ORIGINAL AFTER THIS

NOPE, IT'S VERY MUCH FINITE…

Marvel Vs. Capcom: Infinite

In what has been a stellar year for incredible fighting games, 'decent' just doesn't cut it. And when you're dealing with a comic franchise that loves throwing around terms like 'sensational', 'amazing' and 'spectacular', 'fine' doesn't evoke quite the same degree of majesty. *MvC: Infinite* is a game that just manages to tread water in a sea of such hyperbole, the ultimate irony being that like so many of its absentees, it would probably best be described as 'uncanny' – curious and intriguing, if perhaps not in the ways its creators intended.

Infinite is borderline broken, almost par for the course in a crossover fighter, but here taken to strange new heights that sit at odds with the game's rebrand to court the casual crowd. One fewer character to learn (compared to the 3v3 bouts of old) and simplified inputs could be changes ripped straight from the wish list of a movie-going Iron Man fan, but the new system is currently no more helpful to the MCU fans to which the roster speaks than to fighting fans that just want to throw down. Quick tags enable all manner of exploits, Advancing Guard discrepancies mean you can take hits for trying to play smart, and the clearly unbalanced Gem powers mean there are only one or two worth using. Character imbalance is pretty much excusable at this early stage – it's *MvC* canon for only a small percentage of the roster to be competitively viable, after all – and incoming balance patches will likely tilt the playing field somewhat, even if the top and bottom tiers are unlikely to give up their positions without pretty radical overhauls.

And yet, it's still *fun*. Messing around with combos in the lab proves that there is a degree of depth to this system just waiting to be discovered (and exploited) by the many fans this series has earned over the years. It's a neat system to play around with, even if it's one that favours certain kinds of characters over others – long story short, expect to see a lot of Dante, as the son of Sparda has answers for *everything*.

Infinite's story mode has as much (or as little) going for it as a low-tier MCU movie; it's dumb and inoffensive, with all the forced references you can (barely) eat. But that's only part of a game that doesn't know what it wants to be; Doc Ock pandering with one cool prosthetic limb-esque thing while trying to usher in the hardcore crowd with the rest of his pretendtacles.

Ultimately, *Infinite* raises more questions than it delivers answers. Its roster suggests complacency on Capcom's part, and a more market-led Avengers team than fans might be used to in these games. Its engine asks us whether or not asset reuse is cool, although the fact that Morrigan's sprite previously lasted a decade kind of already answered that one. *Infinite* offers one of the most enjoyable (and broken) tool sets around right now, but whether or not that translates to a game with legs will very much depend upon the fans.

VERDICT 6/10
GONNA TAKE YOU FOR A RIDE

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
STREET FIGHTER X TEKKEN



WORSE THAN
ULTIMATE MARVEL VS CAPCOM 3



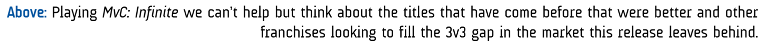
MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

X-FACTOR: *MvC* just doesn't feel like *MvC* without X-Men staples like Magneto, Wolverine and Storm. There are vague analogues – and good reasons why they're absent – but it's just not the same without them. Fingers crossed DLC can remedy this issue down the line…







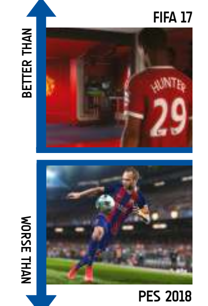

Above: Playing *MvC: Infinite* we can't help but think about the titles that have come before that were better and other franchises looking to fill the 3v3 gap in the market this release leaves behind.

THE LOST ART OF DEFENDING

FIFA 18

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: EA Sports
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 (2-22)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



The English Premier League and Spain's La Liga are generally considered to be the world's finest football leagues, containing the best teams and the deepest rivalries. They're also two very different beasts. Where the Premier League is known for its ferocious pace and dedication to scoring goals and shooting whenever possible, Spain's equivalent is a more considered, tactical affair in which creating quality scoring chances is more important than quantity.

If *FIFA 18* was a football league, it would be the Premier League. Here's a game of digital football in which attacking play is the order of day, the tweaks made to last year's formula almost exclusively designed around allowing you greater freedom when it comes to avoiding defenders and launching shot after shot on goal. Its technique and complexity might be inferior to that of its rival, *PES 2018* – which is very much the La Liga of this season's football games – but it remains a fun and exciting offering for those seeking instant gratification.

New animations centred on making dribbling more intuitive, along with reworked set-piece systems for free kicks and penalties, means you have less excuse than ever not to excel when the ball is at the feet of the likes of Ronaldo, Messi, Neymar and the sport's other great contemporaries.

Flicks of the analogue stick now result in an incredibly satisfying response from attackers, allowing them to change direction with lightning speed with a view to avoiding defenders and creating space for a shot. Depending on what you want from a football game, this is either wonderful or ridiculous; allowing you to pull off audacious dribbles with a consistency like never before, but making defending an arduous and thankless exercise.

Goals are plentiful in matches of *FIFA 18*, not only for you, but also for your opponent. If you want high scorelines then you're in the right place.

That same sense of theatrics is replicated in the returning The Journey story mode. Alex Hunter is back, and we pick up his fledgling footballing career where we left off last year, this season being about cementing his position at the top of the game and earning his dream transfer to play alongside his heroes.

Is it entertaining? Yes. Does it demonstrate quality writing or engage you on an emotional level? No. If it was a movie it would be the equivalent of *Caddyshack* or the new *Star Trek* movies; fun, likeable distractions that entertain, but are immediately forgotten once you've sat through them. It's difficult to criticise The Journey in this regard given that it is clearly designed to deliver this kind of blockbuster entertainment.

That's exactly what *FIFA 18* is: a blockbuster. It's an exaggerated version of the sport the world loves, honing in on the exciting bits and muting the rest. If you're looking for a football simulation then grab a copy of *PES 2018*. If you want a dramatic series of events with every match you play then get *FIFA 18*.



ULTIMATE TEAM: The collectable card game that is *FIFA Ultimate Team* returns, and it is, as ever, best played online. Taking your own fantasy squad online to compete against others is entertaining if only to see how you and your opponent approach things differently.

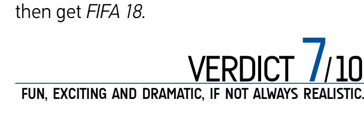


Below: New set piece mechanics have been introduced with an eye to making control of the ball from free kicks, corners and penalties more achievable for the attacking side.





Above: The lighting and atmosphere achieved through the Frostbite engine remains second to none. As much as PES has improved in this area, FIFA still leads the way.



FUN, EXCITING AND DRAMATIC, IF NOT ALWAYS REALISTIC.

IT SEEMS TO REGARD PLAYERS AS TOURISTS WHO CAN'T BE TRUSTED TO DRIVE ELOQUENTLY ENOUGH AND RESPECT THE ENGINEERING

Above: Particularly if you're driving a track for the first time, you may occasionally run into a few technical hitches. Launching off the starting line in *Forza 7*, alongside maybe 23 other painstakingly rendered cars, can cause the frame-rate to stutter. This could cost you precious seconds.



CRATE EXPECTATIONS

The various prizes, extras and racing mods located in *Forza 7*'s crates form part of a concerted effort to make the game less dry. But regardless of whether they offer value for in-game credits, they threaten to turn an otherwise sharp and ultra-high production value racer into something condescending and cheaper. At its outset, *Forza 7* romanticises the car, the driver and the thrill of the race; it also expects you to get excited by the kind of virtual tat, like extra costumes and currency, you'd typically associate with a free iPhone game. The result is an unfortunate tonal clash. On occasion, *Forza*'s pixel-perfect looks feel like an elaborate disguise for simpler, lower sensibilities – when you think of crates, it's hard not to also think of 'content', 'user retention' and other metrics that make every videogame sound like a cynical product.



Above: Like in *Forza Horizon*, slapstick 'Showcase' events break up the typical racing. They're a good place to test out the surprisingly detailed Photo Mode.

BEAUTIFUL RACING, AT ANY COST

Forza Motorsport 7

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Studios
DEVELOPER: Turn 10 Studios
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-24
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN



RIDE

WORSE THAN



DIRT 4





Entry upon entry, the Forza Motorsport series gets a little bigger, a little better looking and a little closer to the ideal of a racing simulation. But one problem seems to never go away. Grandiloquent and self-serious, the tone of these games is also – probably not on purpose – unwelcoming, and *Forza Motorsport 7*, particularly in its opening hours, is now the categorical example. To a frankly masturbatory extent, its opening cutscene puffs and hyperbolises the sport of racing: "drivers will talk about their victories, their losses, their journeys," explains the narrator, in a voice that sounds like she's advertising business class flights. "Here is the starting point for racing dreams, where drivers begin forging their own legacy."

Then *Forza* cuts to a triad of mood-setting, exhibitive races, introducing them by date, driver and what aspect of the motorsport mythos they're supposed to typify. Sitting behind the wheel of the Porsche GT2 RS, a sports car so exclusive that in real life it isn't even available to drive yet, even if you do possess £207,000, it's hard not to feel less like you're having fun and more like you're under pressure to perform; as some apparently legendary driver, and part of a showcase designed to highlight the dramatical, aesthetical and nigh-on spiritual significance of "speed," should you oversteer or crash, you can't help feeling like you're letting *Forza* down, along with its pristine depictions of driving and cars. Creator Turn 10 is trying to sell you on the beauty of the sport. But when you check the pause menu and see that racing lines, traction control, assisted braking and automatic speed regulation are all enabled by default, the studio instead seems condescending, and more interested in an emotionless kind of still photo of racing than a true simulation.

That dynamic – *Forza Motorsport 7*'s determination to ingratiate the majesty of racing to you, and for you to appreciate it – clutters the whole game. Even if you've got the in-game money to buy them, high-performance cars remain locked out, as if to insinuate that until you've grinded away in hatchbacks and proven yourself suitably sedulous to the sport, these machines would be wasted on you. On the contrary, the racing events in *Forza*'s Career Mode are sporadically arranged. Eager to communicate how diverse cars are, and the ostensible range of experiences and emotions they instantiate, *Forza* treats high-speed, low-speed, rally, truck and dozens of other racing events like bite-sized sample cheeses: you do a few races in an American muscle car, then you're forced to swap to a muddy four-wheel drive, or an old Mazda, or something. It talks about the personal legacies of drivers and the wondrous sort of freedom of expression that attends motor-racing, but what *Forza* really seems to care about is its own thoughts and feelings about cars; players following a given structure; and you subscribing to its at times sickly self-importance. If you go to a Showcase event, you get a little lecture telling you how you ought to approach it. If you veer onto the grass for even a second, a prompt appears asking you to rewind. Turn 10 seems to really adore motor-racing, and that's endearing. But it also seems to loathe players, and begrudge their input. It seems to regard us as tourists who can't be trusted to drive eloquently enough or respect the engineering. And after seven games, made successful partly by a trusting fanbase, it needs to get over itself.

Especially because, when it actually shuts up, and unchains and lets you get on with it, *Forza 7* is an excellent racing game. Cars are weighty and physical. The corners on tracks like Laguna Seca feel genuinely dangerous. Between arcade and simulation, the game successfully walks a very thin line: so long as you can resist that experience-ruining rewind function, when you're thronging along at 100-plus, racing in *Forza Motorsport 7* does seems as involved, cerebral and emotionally consuming as promised. At the same time, upgrading your car with new parts and decals is truncated to the touch of a button, and you don't need to get bogged down in any technical nitty-gritty, if you don't want. The garage is enormous – there are over 700 cars – and you'll rarely be looking at the same scenery twice.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

REWIND: It makes them more accessible, but the rewind mechanic, now a staple of racing games everywhere, also robs them of tension and drama. We'd like to try a *Forza* game that stripped it out completely.

It can get bewildering, however. As the game continues, you lose track of how many vehicles and trophies you've accumulated, and which race courses you've visited and haven't. But this is where *Forza* thrives. Ignoring its thematic pretensions, it works as a purely mechanical abstract of racing – a flurry of cars, cups and engine noises that's largely sensory, and doesn't need to be presented in any conventional narrative terms. Maybe that's why it works best online. Among 24 players, all as vicious and fallible as one another, *Forza 7*'s painstakingly designed systems are finally allowed to sing. It doesn't need words, or rather, oratory: researched, pored over and forensically cultivated, *Forza Motorsport 7*'s rigorous simulation, when left alone, allows for drama and personal tales to emerge by themselves.

The Forza series – perhaps modern racing games, generally – could do with relaxing. Owing to its fussy tone, *Forza* seems concerned that we won't understand why car racing is impressive. Its dizzying structure betrays a lack of faith in our attention span, or its own power to entertain. And those loot boxes, those lame little loot boxes, which for in-game credits gift you costumes, cars and temporary buffs that let you earn even more money from races, are the stuff of cruddy mobile games: it's like *Forza* is so insecure it'll copy anything, so long as it's proven to somehow retain players. *Forza Motorsport 7* is big, great-looking, almost ideal racing simulation. But it's also desperate to be respected, and that concern about its own image threatens to overwhelm it.

VERDICT 7/10
ENJOYABLE, BUT ALMOST MARRED BY CONVOLUTED MENUS



Below: There are hundreds of cars to play with and enjoy, but the sense of progression in *Forza 7* is very muddled. From one race to the next, you're driving sluggish hatchbacks and then tricked-out muscle cars. It can get confusing.

FAQs

Q. DOES IT FEEL NEW?
The *Forza Horizon* games have clearly influenced *Motorsport 7*. At its core, though, it remains a faithful racing simulation.

Q. IS 'VIP' WORTH IT?
The 100 per cent credits bonus mod might tempt you in, but be warned: it doesn't permanently apply. In fact, you can only use it on 25 races, total.

Q. HOW HARD IS IT?
Features like automatic braking, racing line and rewind are enabled by default. If you want more of a challenge, go into the pause menu and turn them off.

Semblance is a new ability exclusive to Billie Lurk. It allows you to steal the face of an NPC for a short while. This is very helpful for getting into new areas or getting close to an objective.

TOUCHING THE VOID

Dishonored: Death Of The Outsider

A plot to kill The Outsider is a strong concept for DLC. The dapper, black-eyed god has underlined all our adventures into the blood and filth-filled streets of Dishonored, giving us access to all manner of dark magic. But what if we were to try to kill him? Punish him for all the suffering his putrid sorcery had wrought? That is the central question of Arkane Studios' latest work.

The standalone DLC rides that idea with confidence. Playing as long-time supporting character Billie Lurk, the game starts you out trying to find Daud, her assassin mentor. This then spirals into an assassination attempt on a god, telling an important story for the lore. It's great to see Arkane commit to a plot with huge ramifications for this world in an expansion. It never feels soft-balled because of its form. Lurk is a compelling protagonist, especially if you have spent time with her in earlier games, and the Outsider is a mysterious foil as always. However, the game only sports five missions, meaning for such a substantial tale that deals with many fan-favourite characters, it feels unfairly condensed. A little more breathing room could help the game hit its emotional beats, although it's a fun exploration nonetheless.

The missions that are included certainly are worth celebrating though. While there is nothing quite as unique as the Clockwork Mansion or A Crack in the Slab from the last outing, the levels sport some really solid 'Dishonored-ness'. Depending on if you play lethally or not, if you go through the roof or the sewers, this is characteristically high-tier level design. It still leans on one of Dishonored's strongest tenants: opportunity through choice. This is only supported by the return of the meticulous attention to detail the other games sport, and at times it's almost staggering how much care goes into the craft of these levels. It wasn't rare to spend over two hours just in one, poking and prodding at the craft on display. *Death Of The Outsider* is a great reminder of how good Dishonored really is. That being said, one level is reused from the main game, with significant portions of it even being cut off this time around. It's a shame, as while it's still a fun level, it definitely lacks the freshness of the others.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

DISPLACE: Though tricky at first, Displace is possibly the most flexible movement ability in the franchise.

DETAIL: Despite the franchise's impressive pedigree, *Death Of The Outsider* might well feature the most rewarding exploratory details so far.

DETAILS

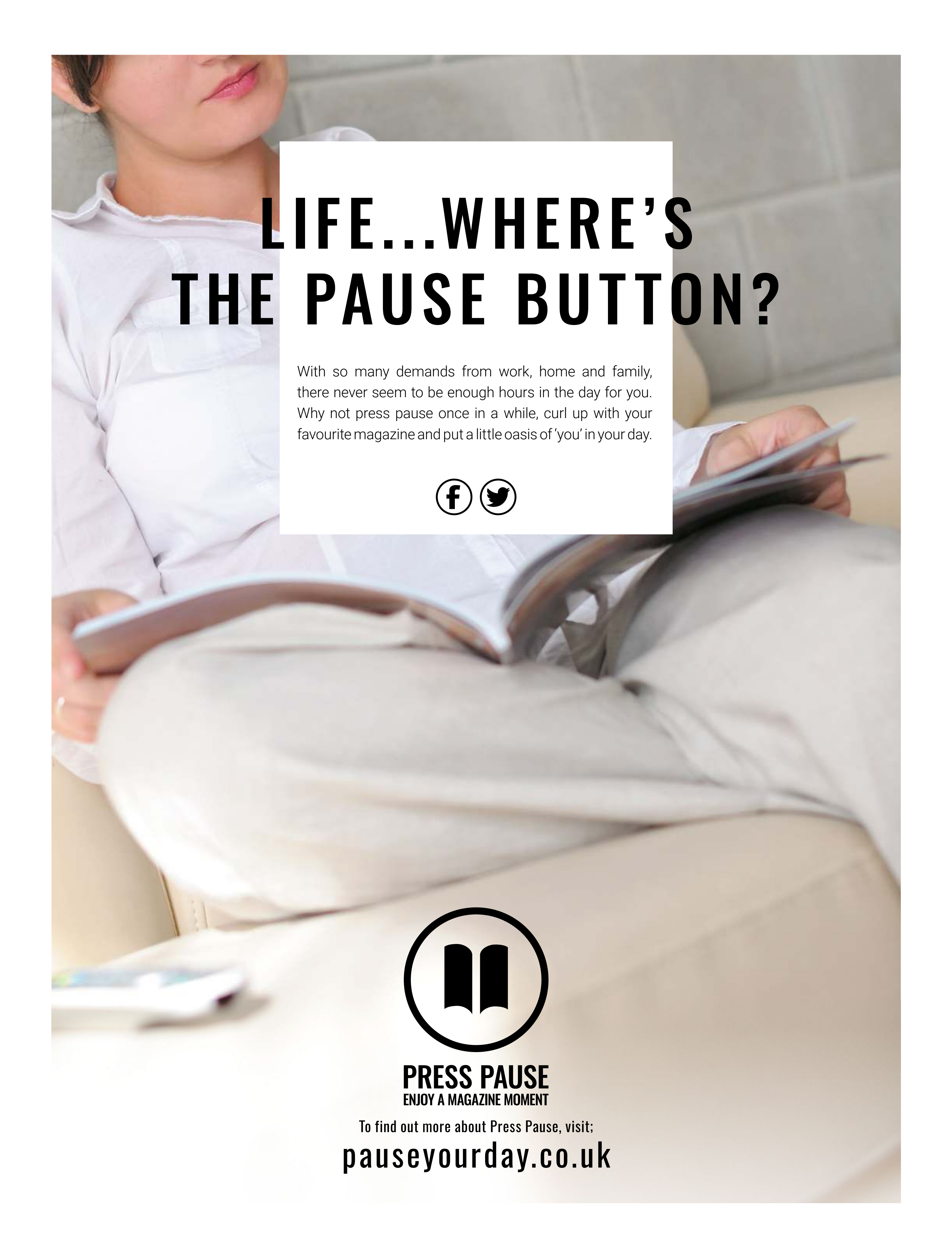
FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Bethesda
DEVELOPER: Arkane Studios
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Death Of The Outsider is more *Dishonored 2*, and if that excites you then this standalone DLC should satisfy. Beyond that, it tells a lore-shifting story, one that will have massive implications for the franchise going forward. In that sense, if you care about the world of Dishonored, it's essential. If you don't care about all that, it's still a fun highlight-reel of the franchise, with some good, expansive levels to get lost in. While such a large story could have used more breathing room, and it lacks just a touch of the unique ideas that were highlights in *Dishonored 2*, the plot to kill The Outsider is certainly a journey worth taking.






LIFE...WHERE'S
THE PAUSE BUTTON?
With so many demands from work, home and family, there never seem to be enough hours in the day for you. Why not press pause once in a while, curl up with your favourite magazine and put a little oasis of 'you' in your day.
PRESS PAUSE
ENJOY A MAGAZINE MOMENT
To find out more about Press Pause, visit;
pauseyourday.co.uk

NOT SO ORIGINAL, BUT UTTERLY DIVINE

Divinity: Original Sin II

With a party ambling around, unsure as where to go next and, frankly, getting a bit tired of all this – literal – running around in circles lark, *Divinity: Original Sin II* throws us a bone. Less metaphorically, we encounter a rat and, realising that a member of the party channels his best Doctor Dolittle and is able to hold a conversation with our animal friends, he manages to garner important quest info from the squeaky plague-bearer and we are able to complete our mission and move onto new and exciting locales.

Divinity: Original Sin II is a game that is absolutely littered with moments like these; you're not always coming up against a brick wall specifically – rather just when you think you know all the answers, the questions get changed. It might sound frustrating, but really it's a vast toolkit handed to the player full of potential solutions to problems and daring you to figure out just what it is you can and can't do to get around an issue. Beat down the door rather than finding a key. Promise not to dob in the local drug fiend after he steals a dealer's stash and then, well, *dob him in anyway* (it does save some trouble). Slaughter the race of cave-dwelling fire-slugs rather than listen to their actual, genuine plight they're suffering through. And all of this just in the first few hours.

The original *Original Sin* was a huge success for Larian, paying superb tribute to classic CRPGs of the Eighties and Nineties while bringing most everything else up to a modern standard you would hope and expect. *Divinity: Original Sin II* refines this formula to such a degree that the score you see at the bottom of the second page was pushing incredibly close to being a ten. Small irritations like the odd performance hiccup, sometimes fiddly targeting issues and over/underpowered characters, classes and spells just pull it back – but be in no doubt: this is one of the finest games out there.

Set in the same world as the previous game, *Original Sin II* picks up some centuries later and in a world riddled with wars, strife, religious persecution and – well, a bit of a *big bad* looming over everything. However players choose to start out with their character – race, class, background all definable – there is one constant: you're a prisoner, you're on a boat to an island prison, and things aren't looking rosy. Where you go from there really depends both on what type of player you are and what type of character you and/or your party members are.

See, *Original Sin II* isn't a game that short changes when it comes to role-playing. If you want to play in a specific fashion, you usually can – like how we opted to garner most of our information from either speaking with local animals or feasting on liberated body parts, the latter down to the elvish ability to relive a person's last moments by sampling their flesh. You can run in and beat everyone

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Belgium
PUBLISHER: Larian Studios
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows7, i5, 4GB RAM, GTX 550/ Radeon HD6XXX, 35GB HDD
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Right: Battles range from insultingly easy to hair-tearingly tough – and this can change mid-battle. Remember to save often, don't be afraid to reload and – much as the gaming 'elite' would snarl at this – opt to lower the difficulty if things get too hard.



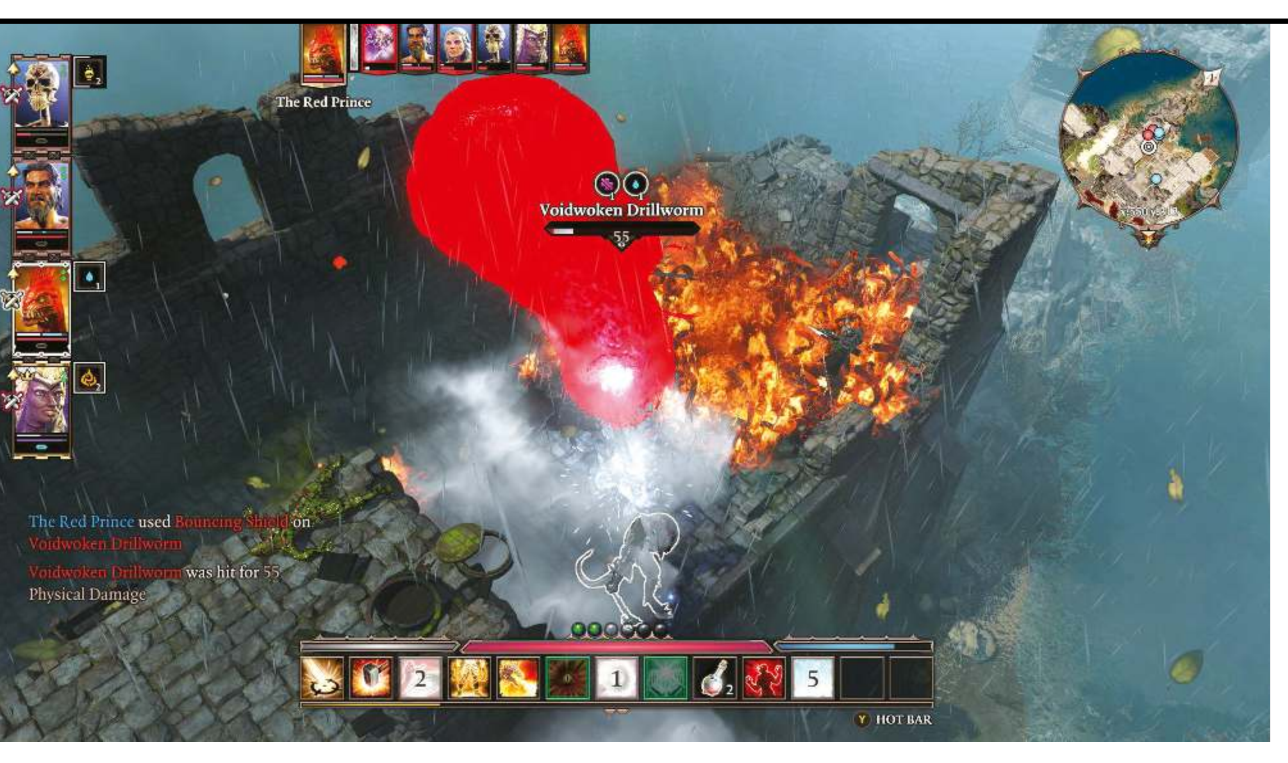
Above: The world of *Original Sin II* is rich, detailed and crafted with all the love and care you would expect from a bunch of people truly committed to their art. It is a world that is a constant joy to explore, and to just be present in.



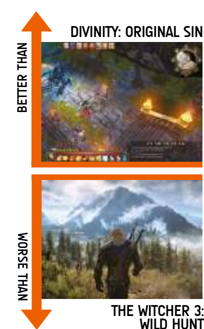
Above: You can either create your own character and have personality traits flagged up in conversation, or choose a prebaked character and inherit their history – and control their future. It's an elegant solution to the created/premade player character debate.



THE SCORE YOU SEE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PAGE WAS PUSHING INCREDIBLY CLOSE TO BEING A TEN



BETTER THAN
DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN



WORSE THAN
THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

FAQs

Q. … TALKING TO ANIMALS?
Yep. The Pet Pal skill returns, and is just as useful as it was in the first game – rats are everywhere, so rats see a lot of things.

Q. IS IT TOO NERDY?
At times, yes. But give it a go – it's such good fun that none of those daft worries matter.

Q. IS IT PO-FACED?
Absolutely not – there's lightheartedness aplenty. We even spotted a reference to classic BBC comedy *Bottom*.

KICKSTARTING SINNERS

Larian Studios turned once again to Kickstarter to raise money for *Original Sin II*, and any doubts it might be pushing its luck were thrown out in record time, with the campaign hitting its funding target in under 12 hours, ultimately hitting four times the asking price.

With over $2 million raised, Larian was able to include everything it pitched as a stretch goal – including the niche (but amazing) Game Master mode, specifically aimed at those of us with a tabletop, D&D background. It's the absolute best kind of fan service, and with a campaign run so well, so successfully and resulting in such a phenomenal game – *for the second time* – it gives us hope for the future of the crowdfunded gaming scene.



down, talk your way through everything, hide and sneak and steal… it's open. It's freeing. And it can be changed up as you see fit, as you progress – at no point do you feel stuck in your ways and like there's no chance of ever mixing up your approach.

Combat is inevitable in the most part, even for the best of talkers, and it's here where *Original Sin II* will cause rifts. Some of us will be more than happy to partake in the challenging, intense and somewhat overwhelming combat scenarios – riddling the floors with fire and ice, poison and oil, static and mist – while others will, frankly, *be overwhelmed*. *Original Sin II* does not mess about, and you'll more likely than not have to reload a fair few times.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

YOUR WAY: *Original Sin II* doubles down on so many aspects relating to playing a personalised experience it's hard to quantify. Basically, every single person will play the game their own way.

But even at its most difficult, *Original Sin II* never makes you want to stop playing. Captivating and engaging to a ridiculous degree; its depth of character, witty writing, endless exploratory possibilities and – frankly – great script make for a CRPG absolutely riddled with personality. It's a game you want to lose hours to, you want to literally get lost in, and one that rewards you whether you do or don't get lost. Admittedly by 'reward' we don't necessarily mean with gold – more just with something happening. Because by crikey it isn't all sunshine and lollipops in the world of *Original Sin II*.

Dropped on top of all of this is an ingenious co-op/competitive multiplayer mode, enabling up to four friends, enemies or strangers to make their way through the game at the same time. And not necessarily together. *Original Sin II* can absolutely be played 'properly' this way, with the story splitting things up between players and making each the hero of their own story. Of course, with four heroes in their own minds running around the game world this can lead to competition and even conflict – and even those playing as a co-operative foursome might sometimes be led astray by a game that keeps on pushing and poking the fact that there is a chosen *one* not a chosen four. It builds fantastically on the original's already-fun multiplayer aspect and is just another way *Original Sin II* shows its sheer quality.

With a bountiful cast of characters – most of which are actually worth talking to – plenty of solutions available to every problem you face and a cheeky, knowing sense of humour riddling the entire experience, *Divinity: Original Sin II* comes as nothing other than wholeheartedly recommended. If it's too hard, play it on an easier difficulty. If it's too boring, ignore the conversations and just get into fights all the time. If it's too long, just be quicker. There's no excuse – get involved.



ONE OF THE VERY BEST CRPGS AVAILABLE

TRULLI SENNASATIONAL

Project Cars 2

Ladies and gentlemen, the world of racing simulators has a new competitor at its top table. *Project Cars 2* builds on the qualities of its predecessor, eradicating most of its problems and adding meaningful new pillars to its motorsports blend. The result is one of the finest racers in a long time and, certainly, the best racing sim of this console generation.

Project Cars 2's greatest success comes in how it instils a sense of aspiration within you. Developer Slightly Mad Studios has combined its handling model, race options and car setups to create an atmosphere that pushes you towards constant self-improvement. Resultantly, *Project Cars 2* makes for a powerfully active experience. You're never allowed to simply sleep-drive through races, and you never want to.

Handling has been tweaked from the original offering; there are less problems with consistent oversteer across the entire vehicle roster and individual cars now feel satisfyingly differentiated from one another. Cars continue to have a tendency to feel a little light – almost as though they're flying just above the track – but this is much less pronounced than last year and isn't prominent enough to detract from the bigger picture.

There is an issue with the initial user experience, though. The handling model is a delicate one, with any heavy handedness on the wheel – or heavy footedness on brake or throttle – being punished by seeing the car spin out from under you when using default game settings. It is not easy to work out which settings to change in order to bring the experience towards something suitable for your ability level.

The lack of any tutorial above and beyond boorishly constructed text descriptions of racing theory, gameplay assists and car-tuning options can make for a painful opening few hours. As a result, *Project Cars 2* is sure to lose a slice of its potential long-term player base on day one. You need to be patient in the early going if you're serious about absorbing yourself in what's

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER: Slightly Mad Studios
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (2-16 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
FORZA MOTORSPORT 6


AS GOOD AS

IRACING



Above: Weather has an enormous impact on what you can expect to achieve in any given race. Depending on your car and your initial tuning and tyre setup, you might find yourself in the pits often if the weather decides to change throughout a race.

Below: Rallycross is one of the more immediately accessible of *Project Cars 2*'s racing disciplines thanks to its acceptance of car-to-car contact and the overall chaos of its dirt-based racing. Do not overlook Rallycross as a legitimate option.

IN ALL ASPECTS, THIS IS A RACING GAME THAT REWARDS COMMITMENT



FAQs

Q. VARIABLE WEATHER OPTIONS?
Yes. Everything from sun to rain, fogs to blizzards are included for you to try and overcome.

Q. CUSTOM CAR TUNING?
You can manually tune your car or have your race engineer do it for you based on your overall goals.

Q. THE MOST CHALLENGING CAR?
The sheer power of the 1,200BHP Mazda MX-5 Radbul makes it difficult to control.

Below: Putting time into practice testing sessions really is crucial if you harbour any desire whatsoever to consistently get yourself on top of the podium.



EAT DIRT

RallyCross is fast growing in popularity and makes its way into Project Cars for the first time. The concept is essentially circuit-based racing on a rally-esque surfaces; with jumps, sideways racing and lots of contact between cars thrown in.

Success here requires a very different set of driving skills to those employed in traditional track racing. The handbrake, for instance, is an incredibly valuable tool for executing late drifts into hairpins and you must quickly learn how to drive quickly and safely when the cars ahead of you are kicking up clouds of dust over your windscreen.

The discipline is more than a novel distraction, though. There's enough depth in the online play for you to dedicate yourself to becoming a champion of RallyCross, should you so desire.

offered, which is where Slightly Mad's design could well lose out to its more established and famous competitors in the form of Forza Motorsport and Gran Turismo.

Once you've mastered the relationship between your inputs and the car's reaction, however, there's so much for you to enjoy. Career mode has slightly more structure to it than the wide-open approach taken by the original, but not so much that your early decisions as to which championships you enter define your existence as a race driver thereafter.

You are free to move between championships dedicated to different forms of vehicles – from karts to IndyCar, Le Mans cars to hatchbacks – largely as you wish, but the most glamorous and respected of competitions are locked away until you've earned a spot. This further adds to the aspirational vibe delivered by the game as a whole in that you must prove yourself worthy of facing off against the best, but how you go about demonstrating your ability is down to you.

All of this takes place across a series of circuits that is arguably the best seen in any racing game, with almost every historically significant real-world track included. The seemingly never-ending bends of the Nurburgring are present and correct, as is the undulating desert of Laguna Seca, the leafy green backdrop of Brands Hatch and Daytona Speedway's giant spectator stands. With 53 tracks, there's plenty to learn and master.

The track itself is just one part of the challenge, though. Your choice of car is another, but just as important to consider is the weather and time of day. Weather can affect your race in extreme fashion, as can the level of light. Combine a full snow blizzard in the dark with the technical challenge posed by a circuit such as Le Mans or Spa and simply finishing in one piece can be considered a victory.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DRIVING SCHOOL: *Project Cars 2* has so much to give, but it doesn't do a good job in teaching you how to take it. A quality driving school would help enormously in getting to grips with a handling model that is more complex than most.

It's best to play single custom races or time trials to test how the different weather options – sunny, foggy, rainy, cloudy, full blizzard etc – force you to approach races in new ways before entering competitive races. Each car and tuning setup presents various helps and hindrances to overcome the elements, so it pays to spend time in testing to minimise the amount of guesswork you've got to commit to when the pressure is on.

In all aspects, this is a racing game that rewards commitment. Handling takes time to understand and bring under control. The tracks and the weather force you to stay vigilant throughout every second you're behind the wheel and all of this makes practice essential rather than optional.

Then there's the AI, which is more aggressive than in *Project Cars 2*'s peers and it's not uncommon to see opponents take surprising risks in a bid to overtake you or a fellow competitor. You might find yourself drifting into a corner only to notice someone coming up like a tornado on your inside, or you having to react quickly as two or more cars ahead of you collide. This results in a lack of predictability that helps single player retain your interest for longer.

Online, of course, aggression levels are dictated by those you're matched against. Up to 16 cars can take the track at any one time, so avoiding trouble can be as good a route to success as sheer speed.

If you've got the time and persistence to learn how to improve and achieve victory then you'll find an enormous amount to love about *Project Cars 2*. It's a less forgiving racing sim than its rivals on console, and that bestows it with a more mature, authentic atmosphere. The early going might be tough, but the rewards make it more than worth it.



THE BEST CONSOLE RACER OF THIS GENERATION





Don't expect to be able to master all tracks instantly. There's enough diversity here to keep you occupied for a long time.

CLASH OF CULTURES

Battle Chasers: Nightwar

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Mac, Xbox One, Switch
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: THQ Nordic
DEVELOPER: Airship Syndicate
PRICE: £24.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

When you think of classic console JRPGs, your mind often jumps to seminal works like *Final Fantasy VII*, *Tales of Symphonia* and the Persona series. *Battle Chasers: Nightwar* takes the design tenets from these classic JRPGs and forms them into its own mould. Based on the classic Nineties comic book *Battle Chasers* written by Joe Madureira, who you might know as the character designer behind the Darksiders series, *Battle Chasers* looks to shake up the JRPG mould with its western take on the classic genre.

We're quickly introduced to our main characters, who are stranded on an island after getting ambushed by bandits on an airship. The meek Gully serves as our main character, who has been bestowed with a magical item she has yet to control. Fleshing out the party are a group of rather bland characters. Garrison is a big heavy warrior with a sword bigger than his entire body, Knolan is our trademark wise old man, Monika is a rogue whose allegiances we shouldn't trust and Calibretto is the mascot robot who may be more human than machine. Unfortunately, the characters all have incredibly forced dialogue, with a bootleg *Guardians Of The Galaxy* feel. Unfortunately, the main story fails to capture and engage, and also lays on tropes faster than we can say stop.

However, the missteps that *Battle Chasers: Nightwar* takes don't stop there. With a fully fleshed-out comic book world behind it, we're put into a world that may as well be called 'generic fantasy kingdom' - the overworld is a branching path, with gruff merchants and all manner of slimes and bandits to kill along the way, which makes it incredible that the game never makes you feel like you're on a journey. The slower turn-based action does not offer players anything new that they've not seen before, especially when it comes to JRPG battle systems. Sure, you can cast spells, manage MP gauges, control casting times and use an 'Overcharge' mechanic, but this simply isn't enough, especially in comparison to recently released JRPGs like *Trails of Cold Steel* and *Ys VIII: Lacrimosa of Dana*, which introduce deeper mechanics that allow you to get invested into combat.

The procedurally generated dungeons offer some serviceable trawling through beautiful landscapes, thanks to the wonderful art direction, but once again is let down by there being an incredibly flat and sterile personality of the rest of the game. This is further exemplified through its one-note fantasy soundtrack that could have been the much-needed injection of personality that the game sorely needs. While *Battle Chasers* might want to offer us a 'classic RPG' experience, all we're left with is a shallow imitation of better games that feels like its been cut out from a template, offering nothing new.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

FREE EXPLORATION: Being trapped on the limited overworld felt incredibly restrictive; adding a fully explorable open map would have alleviated the small-scale feel of the game.

BETTER THAN: INFINITE UNDISCOVERY
WORSE THAN: STAR OCEAN: THE LAST HOPE



Above: Neither the characters nor the storyline are particularly engaging, so it's easy to lose interest.
Below: The gorgeous environments can make for some lovely eye-candy.





Above: Sometimes, slow loading can make you wait up to a minute before getting into battle.



FAILS TO CAPTURE THE IMAGINATION


The novelty of riding and teaming up with iconic creatures from throughout the series is undeniably a high point. *Stories* does a decent job at portraying a bond between your Rider and their team.

A BUMPY RIDE

Monster Hunter Stories

Spinning Monster Hunter off into a turn-based RPG isn't much of an ask. After all, a lot of the groundwork has already been done; you can bring the crafting, gathering and mission systems across wholesale, and that's exactly what Marvelous has done for *Monster Hunter Stories*. All you need to approach differently is the combat, and tweak the premise ever so slightly – namely tone down that whole 'hunting' thing.

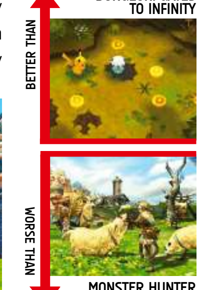
Stories works by drawing in elements from Pokémon and JRPGs like Dragon Quest. Your character is not a Hunter here, but a Rider instead. This shift means that you'll be battling *alongside* 'Monsties' and levelling them up, rather than cutting off their body parts and wearing them – although a degree of that still exists in the game's armour and weapon crafting. And it works well, both thematically and in terms of gameplay. You can have a roster of up to five creatures with you at any time and they help you navigate the overworld, plus, of course, taking part in battles alongside their Rider.



DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Capcom/ Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Marvelous
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (one-on-one online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
POKEMON MYSTERY DUNGEON: GATES TO INFINITY



WORSE THAN
MONSTER HUNTER GENERATIONS

These fights employ a rock-paper-scissors setup, with Power, Speed and Tech attacks respectively. If you end up 'winning' an attack, you do extra damage and fill a 'Kinship' gauge – once that's full, you can mount your Monstie and perform an extravagant Kinship attack (*Stories*' version of a limit break) for massive damage. The different monster types tend to favour a certain type of attack, which is a fair translation of the core series' 'observe-and-overcome' combat. It's a decent, if incredibly simple, combat system, but fights never seem too difficult – it all turns into busywork fairly quickly.

That's remedied somewhat by the presentation, though. Attacks are over the top and full of flair. The game in general looks pretty great, actually. However we noticed a deluge of frame-rate drops using 3DS XL, particularly in larger settlements, and some NPCs' textures took a while to load in, which took us out of the vibrant world that Marvelous tries to impress you with.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

THE GUN SHOW: It's a shame that Monster Hunter's ranged weapons are absent in *Stories*. With their different ammo types, their inclusion could have added more options to combat.



You won't be wanting for things to do in *Stories*. The main quest is a serviceable, yet charming anchor and there's enough hunting and gathering side quests to keep you entertained, and there's also PVP for those who want to take their Monsties online. This is all underpinned by a host of robust RPG systems, such as splicing your monster's genes, weapon and armour upgrades, and, of course, recruiting more Monsties by gathering and hatching eggs.

It's evident that this is My First Monster Hunter, designed for those of a younger age who may like the idea of taking down huge dinosaurs, but who aren't interested in getting deep into a traditional Monster Hunter game's grind or high-skill play. And in that sense it's fine, but fans hoping for something as in-depth as the main series will be disappointed.


VERDICT 6/10

A FINE, YET LUKEWARM, RPG SPINOFF



TOTAL TIME
0'08"28
42
LAP TIME
1
0'08"28
2
_'__"__
4
SHIFT
224 km/h



"The track design in Sega Rally, for my money, has never been bettered"

JEZ HARRIS, SENIOR PRODUCER, SUPERMASSIVE GAMES

WHY I ♥...

SEGA RALLY CHAMPIONSHIP

JEZ HARRIS, SENIOR PRODUCER, SUPERMASSIVE GAMES.

"What would be the one I'd pick, if I could only choose one that I love? I'd have to pick Sega Rally Championship*. Specifically, it would be the Saturn version, which I know is not necessarily the finest piece of engineering of all time. But it's purely because of the hours that I had spent with it; the fact that you can still go back to it today* and *still get excited about shaving 0.01 of a second from your time is absolutely magnificent. And the track design in* Sega Rally*, for my money, has never been bettered. The fact that I can still close my eyes and drive through the entire game now, some 23 years on, is just incredible."*

RETRO

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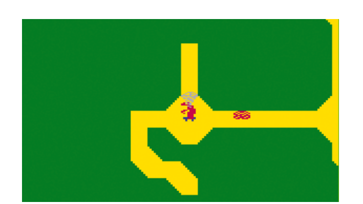


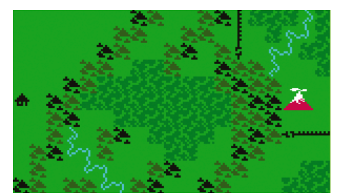
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THE RETRO GUIDE TO... DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

The tabletop experience that is at the heart of every role-playing game ever made has given us a rich catalogue of its own videogames

FEW GAMES ARE as influential as Dungeons & Dragons. While it has arguably shaped RPGs from the moment they were created, its DNA can also be found in virtually any game that uses stats and levelling-up systems to enhance characters and enemies – from Borderlands to FIFA. Pop culture is littered with references to Dungeons & Dragons, while numerous Hollywood stars, including Vin Diesel, Dan Harmon and Dwayne Johnson, all play the game. It's somewhat understandable, then, that a tabletop game as popular as D&D would receive numerous videogame adaptations over the years. And while many of them take the form of RPGs and adventures, you'll be surprised at just what genres developers have attempted to marry the popular licence to.





ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: CLOUDY MOUNTAIN 1982

INTELLIVISION

Most won't know of *Cloudy Mountain*, as it was never released outside of America. It marks a watershed moment for the popular tabletop franchise though, as it was the first officially licensed D&D game for a home console.

A big game for its time (it was one of the first Intellivision games to use more than 4k of ROM) it features all the tropes you'd associate with a game of D&D. As a lone adventurer you can battle monsters, explore randomly generated mazes and search for treasure. It's an admittedly basic game and the combat is laughably simplistic, but it still manages to capture D&D's essence.



POOL OF RADIANCE 1988

VARIOUS

Created by Strategic Simulations Inc, this would be the first of many D&D releases that would use the actual rule set of the original tabletop game. It allows you to create a party of adventurers across six different races and several classes, and also allows characters to multiclass. Playing in exploration mode offers numerous viewpoints, and allows characters to trade, cast and learn new spells and interact with enemies and NPCs, while the combat mode features an overview of the battlefield and allows you to control individual characters (or pass play over to the computer if you're feeling lazy). The ability to export your characters to later games was a stroke of genius on SSI's part, and it's the first game to be set in the popular Forgotten Realms setting.





HEROES OF THE LANCE 1988

VARIOUS

This interesting side-on adventure is the first game set in the Dragonlance world, and is based on the novel *Dragons Of Autumn Twilight*. Guiding a party of eight adventurers (with each having unique skills based on their class) the player is tasked with exploring the ruins of Xak Tsaroth to retrieve the Disks of Mishakal.

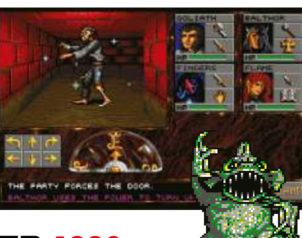


CHAMPIONS OF KRYNN 1990

VARIOUS

The first of three 'Gold Box' games to be set in the Dragonlance setting, *Champions Of Krynn* introduced numerous new mechanics to SSI's tried-and-proven game engine. It's the first game in the series to feature a difficulty select, while a number of new races are introduced, including Kender and new types of Elves and Dwarves. A new Knight of Solamnia class featured, while Mages now draw power from the different phases of the moon. Combat is far easier than previous games, as players are typically not overwhelmed with enemies, while the whole game flows far better thanks to a more streamlined engine.





EYE OF THE BEHOLDER 1990

VARIOUS

This excellent RPG is *Dungeon Master* in all but name. Taking place in the Forgotten Realms setting and set under the city of Waterdeep, the player creates four characters to explore the sewers and the sprawling caverns beyond them. Movement is tile-based (allowing you to draw maps on graph paper) and combat takes place in real-time, with you right clicking on the appropriate weapon to battle enemies or cast spells. Created by Westwood Associates, who would go on to create the Command & Conquer series, it's one of the first D&D games to truly capture the experience of a proper adventuring party.





DRAGON STRIKE 1990

VARIOUS

■ Westwood Associates created several D&D games, but this one was by far its most interesting. Set in the world of Dragonlance, it's effectively an arcade-based flight simulator that sees you controlling a dragon and facing off against other winged creatures from the D&D universe, including other dragons. Your dragon's primary attack is its rechargeable breath weapon, but it can also attack with its claws should enemies get near enough. The ground can be just as much a threat as incoming monsters, so use of the radar becomes critical at all times. A particularly nice touch is how you can upgrade to more powerful dragons as missions are successfully completed.





EYE OF THE BEHOLDER II: THE LEGEND OF DARKMOON 1991

VARIOUS

■ This is Westwood Associates' best D&D game. The levels are far more complex and interesting to navigate, while there are also outside sections to explore, which adds much-needed variety. Darkmoon Temple features a larger array of monsters to battle, too, while the puzzles and traps you encounter are far more interesting to defeat. While it's possible to start a brand new party, it's far more fun to import your heroes from the previously completed game. A sequel was released in 1993.



WHILE IT'S POSSIBLE TO START A BRAND NEW PARTY, IT'S FAR MORE FUN TO IMPORT YOUR HEROES FROM THE PREVIOUSLY COMPLETED GAME





DARK SUN: SHATTERED LANDS 1993

PC

■ The post-apocalyptic setting of *Dark Sun* was a world away from other D&D universes, so it made sense that SSI's videogame adaptation was also a different beast to what it had attempted before. There's a lesser emphasis on dungeon crawling, allowing gamers to get stuck into the decent battle system, which this time, is based around the 2nd Edition ruleset. Versions were planned for the Saturn and PlayStation, but were eventually cancelled. A sequel, *Wake Of The Ravager*, arrived in 1994.





DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: TOWER OF DOOM 1994

ARCADE, SATURN

■ Capcom's super-charged side-scrolling fighter is best described as *Golden Axe* on steroids. Set in the world of Mystara, it allows four players to take on some of the franchises most iconic enemies, ranging from Displacer Beasts to various dragons. There are multiple paths to take through many of the levels, while the combat puts many similar scrolling fighters to shame, offering all sorts of technical skills, ranging from dashes to crouching and evading. An even better sequel, *Shadow Over Mystara*, arrived in 1996, offering two additional heroes as well as variants for each class. It also added Street Fighter-style special moves. Both games were rereleased in 2013 as *Dungeons & Dragons: Chronicles Of Mystara*.



RAVENLOFT: STRAHD'S POSSESSION 1994

PC

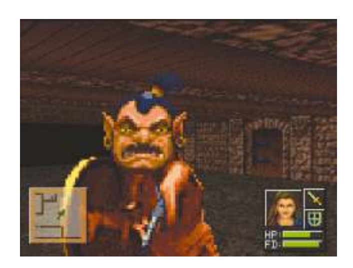
■ The D&D adventure *Ravenloft* proved so popular that an eventual campaign setting was built around it. Its popularity with tabletop players meant that three videogame adaptations arrived, with *Strahd's Possession* being the first.

Developed by DreamForge Intertainment, *Strahd's Possession* sees the players transported to the count's domain of Barovia as they attempt to retrieve a stolen amulet. Utilising a similar 3D engine to the one found in SSI's *Menzoberranzan*, the game was criticised on release for its slow-moving visuals and cumbersome gameplay, but applauded for its excellent soundtrack and solid voice acting. The adventuring is solid enough though, which led SSI to commission a second follow-up game, *Stone Prophet*, which took place in the Egyptian-themed setting of Har'Akir.





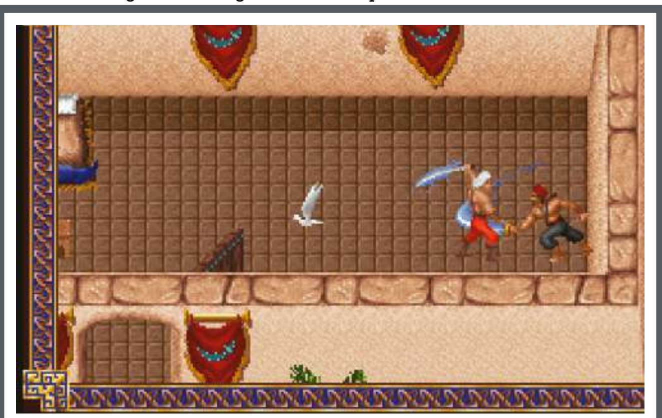





ADVANCED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: SLAYER 1994

3DO

Released exclusively for the 3DO, Slayer utilises the same first-person viewpoint of so many earlier games in the series, but dramatically ramps up the action side of things. It's notable for not only having randomly generated dungeons each time you play, but for also featuring a randomly generated boss encounter, too. Loosely based around the 2nd Edition ruleset, a sequel, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Deathkeep*, arrived in 1996.



AL-QADIM: THE GENIE'S CURSE 1994

PC

The Arabian Nights-styled setting of Al-Qadim wasn't massively successful, meaning it only produced a single videogame adaptation. It's one of the most basic games produced in terms of character creation, allowing you to play nothing other than a simple Corsair. Experience is gained through solving puzzles and quests, with the game using a simple icon-driven interface. Combat is real-time, but extremely simplistic, and the whole effort smacks of mediocrity. You can ride a magic carpet, though.




IRON & BLOOD: WARRIORS OF RAVENLOFT 1996

PC, PLAYSTATION

The third Ravenloft game was originally intended for the 3DO M2 console, but was eventually moved over to other systems when the ambitious console tanked. It might have been best off tanking with it, as *Iron & Blood* is a painfully generic one-on-one fighter from Take-Two Interactive that has very little going for it. There's a decent range of gladiators and some fun special moves, but the motion-captured characters are let down by jerky animation and awkward camera angles. Truly terrible.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALEX JIMENEZ

The Tower Of Doom designer sharpens his + 1 battleaxe again

How did you come to work on Capcom's D&D games?

I got my entry into the industry by the great forces of the universe: happenstance and dumb luck. Capcom was having difficulty getting product approval from TSR, which was the company that controlled and published D&D. Capcom Japan had turned to its US branch to try and work something out with TSR, with SSI mediating – SSI was the holder of the videogame licence and had subbed it out to us for an arcade game. The problem was that most of the USA staff consisted of sales and manufacturing folks who didn't play D&D. Enter one of the lesser-sung heroes of the videogame world: a guy named James Goddard. He complained to a female friend of his – who was a friend of mine as well – about the difficulties they were having, and how he needed help in general. She referred him to me, as she knew I played a lot of D&D and she thought I could be helpful in demonstrating the basic concepts of the game. So they brought me on as 'special consultant' and as an assistant to James.

What did your role entail?

My duties were to research how D&D could be better explained to the Japanese, coming up with concept ideas, assisting in the testing of new games and gathering data from field-tested arcade games. From that humble beginning, the duties kind of grew and expanded. Having never worked on a videogame, I wrote what was basically a module adventure; something I would have – and, in fact, did – put my regular players through, and presented it. After a few meetings with TSR and SSI, I was given the job of writing and designing what would become *Dungeons & Dragons: Tower Of Doom*.

Were there any problems along the way?

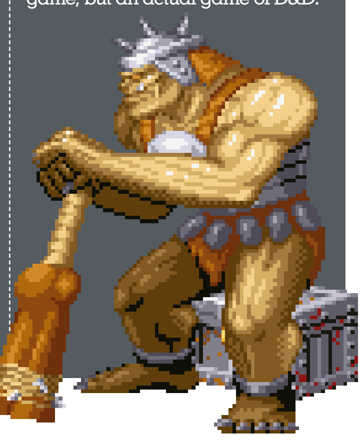
There were some major differences in opinion on what the game would be like. Capcom felt it should be more Asian in flavour, styled more like the anime series Record Of Lodoss War, and many of the early character designs reflected this. On the other hand, TSR wanted it to reflect a more traditional Western D&D game, and I was caught right in the middle! The language barrier was formidable, but fortunately we had plenty of excellent help in that department.

What games inspired *Tower Of Doom*?

My personal inspirations came from Sega's *Golden Axe*, which I loved, and an old LaserDisc game called *Thayer's Quest*, which, to my knowledge, was the first coin-op to use an inventory system. *Thayer's Quest* also used the multiple path system that I adopted into the D&D games.

Do you feel you captured the spirit of the original game?

During the entire development of D&D we had one goal: to reproduce, as closely as possible, the experience of playing D&D. I wanted people who played D&D and people who never had. I wanted both groups to walk away from the game thinking that they had played not just an arcade game, but an actual game of D&D.



THE ULTIMATE DUNGEON MASTER

Chris Avellone revisits his story-fuelled epic

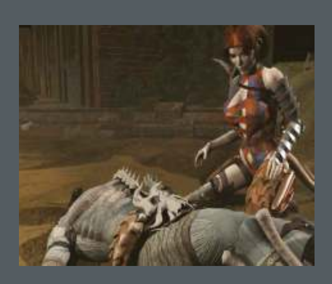
What's it like writing a story for a game like *Planescape: Torment*?
Like just about every game I've worked on in my career, the franchise or premise was mandated, and then I worked within the parameters given. To *Planescape*'s credit, the 'parameter' of the franchise is that there are no parameters. So in many respects, it was the most free-form franchise I've had the opportunity to work with.

Why is there so much interesting lore in the game?
I love short stories and characters that tell short stories, thus, a lot of the inventory items, such as the Fanged Mirror of Yehcir-Eya, and minor NPCs like Crier of Es-Annon have quite a few *Planescape* stories to tell. I tried to keep these stories interesting by keeping player hooks in them, and training players to recognise that even seemingly minor quest givers and items may likely have an insight into something you've done in the past, which is a designer bribe to make people pay attention for selfish reasons.

Are there any regrets you have?
Combat took a back seat to character advancement, creation, quests, areas and the narrative. I regret this, and wish we had a systems designer assigned to the project. Focusing on a narrative is one thing, but if the moment-to-moment gameplay is lacking, then you've failed as a game designer. Sometimes a game can shine by one thing it does really well, and in Torment's case, I think the narrative elements were that one thing. So, if you enjoy narrative from a moment-to-moment experience, great, but the combat was pretty weak. I did feel it could have used more dungeon crawling areas for players to explore and have fun in, in addition to having fun exploring the conversations in the game.

How did Dave Maldonado, a bugs tester, end up becoming a designer on the game?
His bugs were great, and showed that he had a good editorial sense and was able to critique pacing, flow, grammar and logic. I asked if he'd be willing to write a zombie for me as an impromptu writing test. In short, he wrote a great zombie. So I asked if he could write more and be brought on, so then he took on more and more responsibility until he was a full-blown area designer. He was largely responsible for the Clerk's Ward and its many sub-areas.

Are you surprised by its popularity still?
It's hard for me to believe sometimes. It was hard to think at the time that people would like this game so much, which is a sign that maybe you're not realising the potential of your game design correctly. It's definitely been the most popular game people have cited, and when they cite it, it's often clear they played the game extensively ('Where did you get the idea for the bronze sphere smelling of custard?'), which makes me happy, and I know it makes the *Torment* team as a whole very happy to see it referenced so much.





BALDUR'S GATE 1998

VARIOUS



Before it achieved mass acclaim for its Mass Effect and Dragon Age franchises, Bioware was best-known for revitalising the then stagnating D&D brand. The core story of *Baldur's Gate* is of an incredibly high standard, while the many NPCs you meet, or who join your party, are full of character and incredibly fleshed out. A fog of war effect is found throughout the game world, creating a nice sense of exploration, while combat takes place in real-time and lets you use scripted AI if you so wish to. An enhanced remake, which included the *Tales Of The Sword Coast* expansion, was released in 2012.





PLANESCAPE: TORMENT 1999

VARIOUS

This staggeringly good adventure from Black Isle Studios is not only considered to be the best D&D game of all time, but is also seen by many as one of gaming's best western RPGs. Even today, some 18 years after its original release, it still holds up incredibly well, thanks to its intricately layered story and its fascinating selection of characters that join your amnesia-stricken hero on his quest. The story is by the acclaimed writer Chris Avellone, and is an intelligently written yarn that takes you across the D&D multiverse by way of a cynical talking skull and a pyromania-obsessed mage. This layered characterisation extends to the NPCs and the game worlds, making *Torment* a tremendous journey with a hard-hitting resolution. Its success led to a spiritual successor, *Torment: Tides Of Numenera*, appearing in 2017, alongside an enhanced version of *Torment* by D&D remake veterans, Overhaul Games.



ICEWIND DALE 2000

PC, MAC

Like *Baldur's Gate* and *Planescape: Torment* before it, *Icewind Dale* utilises Bioware's Infinity Engine. Designed by Black Isle Studios, *Icewind Dale* is set in a harsh area of the Forgotten Realms, made famous by the novels of R. A. Salvatore, and features many of the locations from that series. While it features more polished action, it's let down by an overall weaker storyline. An expansion and a sequel appeared in 2001 and 2002 respectively.

BALDUR'S GATE: DARK ALLIANCE 2001

VARIOUS

Dark Alliance takes a lot of cues from Blizzard's Diablo series, and is far more action-orientated than its PC counterpart. There are only three predetermined character classes: a dwarven fighter, human archer and elven sorceress, which will displease some, but the excellent co-operative mode more than makes up for the lack of characters. While a sequel, *Dark Alliance II*, arrived in 2004, a planned third game was cancelled.



NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2004

VARIOUS

■ Bioware's *Neverwinter Nights* was inspired by the earlier MMORPG that had run on AOL from 1991-1997. While it's notable for featuring an excellent 60-hour campaign mode, *Neverwinter Nights* was primarily designed for online play, and featured a unique engine called the Aurora Engine that allowed players to create their own adventures called modules. It was ably supported by Bioware in the form of expansions and 'premium modules' until 2006, when Obsidian Entertainment's *Neverwinter Nights 2* was released.





FORGOTTEN REALMS: DEMON STONE 2004

VARIOUS

■ This epic offering was not only written by the acclaimed D&D author R.A. Salvatore, but also featured voice acting from Patrick Stewart and the late Michael Clarke Duncan. It's effectively a modern-day hack and slash, similar to the Lord Of The Rings action games, but is one-player only. To make up for this it's possible to switch between the three available characters (once they're all playable), allowing you to deal with different scenarios on the fly.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: TACTICS 2007

PSP

■ Handhelds are perfect for Tactical RPGs, but Kuju Entertainment's stab at the genre resulted in a disappointing D&D experience. Aside from being extremely easy, *Tactics* is hobbled by an overly long character creation set-up (which can be thankfully skipped), uninteresting maps, a fairly dense menu system and a low cap that tops out at 20. It features a solid range of classic monsters and some fun local multiplayer, but there's otherwise very little to get excited about.





LORDS OF WATERDEEP 2014

IOS, ANDROID, STEAM

■ This is actually an adaptation of the popular boardgame published by Wizards Of The Coast. It's effectively a worker placement game, with players having a set number of Agents that they can assign to various parts of Waterdeep to attract adventurers, who are then used to complete quests. Each player also has a lord with a secret (hopefully game-winning) objective that earns additional points at the game's end.





DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: DRAGONSHARD 2005

PC

■ While this wasn't the first real-time strategy game to be set in the D&D universe – *Stronghold* precedes it by a good decade – it's arguably the one you should be playing. Like similar RTS games, there are vastly different factions to master, various resources to manage and a large number of different buildings you can create to enhance your forces. While *Dragonshard* offers numerous multiplayer matches and modifiable skirmish battles, it's let down by a rather short campaign mode.

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS ONLINE 2006

PC, MAC

■ This popular MMORPG has gone through several iterations over the last 11 years, and has also changed ownership from Turbine to Standing Stone Games. The latest version of the game adds adventures set in the Forgotten Realms, and is probably the best adaptation of the tabletop game that the franchise has seen, with a large number of races and classes to choose from. It utilises a free-to-play model that's been in place since 2009.





SWORD COAST LEGENDS 2015

VARIOUS

■ The most recent D&D game is another ARPG, and a fairly disappointing one for the brand to finish on, more so when you consider that its director, Dan Tudge, also oversaw *Dragon Age: Origins*. Set in the popular Sword Coast region of the Forgotten Realms, it's a conventional hack-and-slash with a cliché-ridden story and uninteresting NPCs that even its Dungeon Master mode can't save.

MORE D&D GAMES

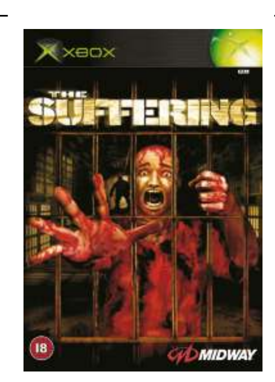
- DRAGONS OF FLAME VARIOUS 1989
- CURSE OF THE AZURE BONDS VARIOUS 1989
- SECRET OF THE SILVER BLADES VARIOUS 1990
- GATEWAY TO THE SAVAGE FRONTIER VARIOUS 1991
- NEVERWINTER NIGHTS PC 1991
- FANTASY EMPIRES PC 1993
- MENZOBERRANZAN VARIOUS 1994
- BLOOD & MAGIC PC 1996
- DESCENT TO UNDERMOUNTAIN 1997 PC
- BALDUR'S GATE II: SHADOWS OF AMN PC, MAC 2000
- BALDUR'S GATE: DARK ALLIANCE II PS2, XBOX 200
- NEVERWINTER NIGHTS II PC, MAC 2006
- DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: DAGGERDALE VARIOUS 2011

A big thanks to **gog.com** for supplying several of the games that appear in this feature

BEHIND THE SCENES

THE SUFFERING

Prisons are dark, scary and foreboding places full of bad people. But none of them compare to the setting of 2004's The Suffering, a jail that's quite literally hell on earth. **games™** welcomes you to the Abbott State Penitentiary…



Released: 2000
Format: PC, Xbox, PlayStation 2
Publisher: Midway Games
Key Staff: Richard Rouse III (producer/lead designer), Jerusha Hardman (lead art), Patrick Betremieux (lead programmer), Scott Cummings (lead animator), Alan Patmore (project director), Stuart Denman (technical director), Boyd Post (lead sound designer), Ben Olson (character design)

AFTER FORMING IN THE MID-NINETIES, SEATTLE-BASED SURREAL STUDIOS HAD ALREADY CEMENTED ITS REPUTATION BY 2002 WITH GAMES SUCH AS THE DRAKAN SERIES AND AN ADAPTATION OF THE FIRST LORD OF THE RINGS MOVIE, *FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING*. Having previously worked with publishers such as Sony, Activision and Vivendi, the developer found itself in discussion with Midway Games regarding a third-person horror action game, as, with a reputation built on arcade, sports and fighting games, the publisher was keen to diverse into new areas. Freshly relocated to Seattle and starting at Surreal in the June of 1999, Richard Rouse III recalls how the idea behind *The Suffering* was first mooted.

"Surreal was just wrapping up the first Drakan game when I arrived," he says, "and I was hired to work on an ill-fated western named *Six Gun*, and then *Gunslinger*. I ended up working on *Drakan: The Ancients' Gates*, before that wrapped and we began pitching new games. One of those pitches was called Unspeakable, which would later be renamed The Suffering." Unspeakable's original plot was the result of an in-house brainstorm, and quite different to the final pitch. "We came up with a bunch of ideas and whittled them down to one," continues Rouse, "where there's a small college town and a scientific experiment gone wrong. The player wanders around this town, and it has all these odd creatures in it." An obvious similarity to a certain PlayStation hit became swiftly evident. "I went to go and write this up and realised that we had designed a game very similar to *Silent Hill*. I went back to the studio head [Alan Patmore] with this problem and we both

> **I STARTED WITH THE HAUNTED PRISON IDEA, BUT ACTUALLY MADE MOST OF THE REST UP AS I WROTE**
> Richard Rouse III

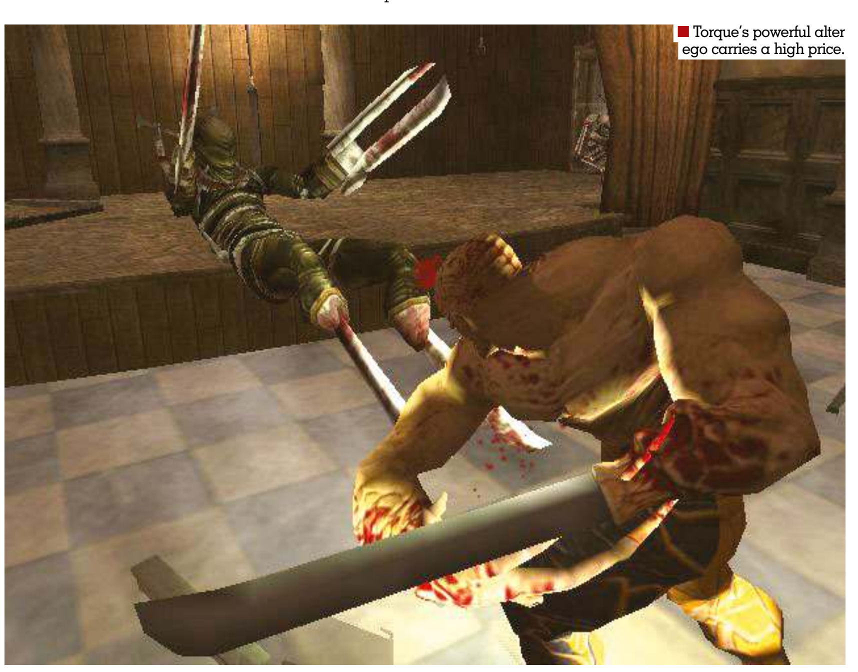


The weaponry at Torque's disposal becomes more powerful as the game wears on.

then remembered that early in the brainstorming, an artist named Steve Allen had suggested setting the game in a haunted prison." In a roundabout way, *The Suffering*'s atmospheric location had been chosen, Rouse returned to his desk, and composed a fresh two-page pitch. "I started with the haunted prison idea, but actually made most of the rest up as I wrote. This pitch ended up being surprisingly close to the finished game." Jerusha Hardman, who had begun work at Surreal as an environment artist after graduating from the Art Institute of Seattle, eventually became art lead for *The Suffering*. "I liked the initial idea for the game because it wasn't just a regurgitation of other action or horror games out there – it was unique. Richard truly wanted to tell a story, and I admired that."

The Suffering is the story of Torque, taciturn inmate of the Abbott State Penitentiary, situated on the fictional island of Carnate, Maryland. Despite his claims of having blacked out and being innocent of his crimes, Torque has been convicted of the murder of his ex-wife and two children, and sentenced to death. Not long after he arrives at the foreboding prison, there's a dramatic earthquake that releases a horde of demonic monsters into the facility. It would appear all hell has broken loose, with the deranged spirits of previous infamous prisoners appearing, along with the mass of hideous demons. As he discovers, Torque himself is not immune to the evil within the prison, or indeed his own personal inner demons; the player's task is to help him escape the island while simultaneously confronting his own tormented soul. *The Suffering*, for better or worse, would not be a game for the faint of heart; from its opening cut-scene, there's plenty of violence and crude language. "Fortunately Midway were very accepting of this," recalls Rouse. "They actually pushed us on the violence front – remember they were a company mostly associated with Mortal Kombat, so violence was practically its brand. As to the swearing, I knew with it being set in a prison, it would be ridiculous if the characters didn't swear. I also admit to enjoying the sound of a cleverly used obscenity!"

Although it contained a relatively novel setting and premise, many of *The Suffering*'s influences were evident,



Torque's powerful alter ego carries a high price.

■ Turn on the leccy and Torque bears witness to the phantom execution of an infamous old inmate.



WHAT THEY SAID…

The end result is a much more action-packed experience that might be a little too straightforward in spots, but it does make for a solid action game. It's a pretty refreshing take on horror-themed games

Gamespot Review

including the aforementioned Konami survival horror series. "We all liked *Silent Hill 2* a lot," remembers Richard, "But to be honest more of the inspiration, in terms of videogames, came from *Half-Life* and wanting to make a horror-orientated and third-person version of something that felt like a first-person shooter. We liked horror games, but hated feeling weak in them, and I really hated the old clunky controls." In terms of the horror themes themselves, Rouse was mainly inspired by non-game material. "Early on, I made a list of my favourite five horror movies. In chronological order they were *Psycho*, *The Birds*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Shining* and *Ringu*." A fine selection, erring more to the psychological side of horror, nods **games**™ in approval. "None of them you'd call 'modern horror' in their time, with the possible exception of *Ringu*, which wasn't widely known in the west at this point. And strangely, *Candyman*, which I feel is closest to our tone, I hadn't seen at that point. Now, it's one of my favourite horror films." Away from the screen, literature played a big part too thanks to the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe, H.P. Lovecraft and Jack Ketchum. "And there were also documentary sources," adds Rouse, "such as a book called *Newjack* which is about the life of a prison guard, and Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*. I wanted to do something new, and getting inspiration from outside of games was a great way to do that." Additionally, much discussion over the tone of *The Suffering* fell into a thematic battle between two famous sci-fi horror films. To Rouse's initial chagrin, the game leaned more to the side of *Aliens* than *Alien*. "I definitely wanted the game to be more like *Alien*, with its psychological creepiness. But in the end I was okay with the fact it turned out more like *Aliens* in terms of the player's firepower and body count. I wanted the player to feel powerful." From an artistic standpoint, Hardman researched old abandoned prisons and locations in order to achieve the right look for the Abbot State Penitentiary. "That was, frankly, super cool," she grins, "and we also all watched a lot of horror movies. Personally, I'm not one to shy away from edgy things, but sometimes I did feel we might have been trying too hard for that M rating. I was more interested in making the game look disturbing, rather than super gross."

WE LIKED SILENT HILL 2 A LOT… BUT TO BE HONEST MORE OF THE INSPIRATION CAME FROM HALF-LIFE

Richard Rouse III

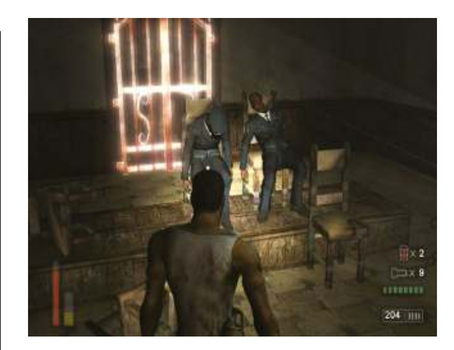
From its very inception, *The Suffering* was designed around Surreal's own in-house engine, called Riot. Continues Hardman, "It was cool because we could tailor it to do what we wanted, but challenging in that we had to have a team of engineers dedicated to doing just that. And as you can imagine, everyone had things they wanted it to do." The engine had been ported over to the PlayStation 2 for Surreal's second Drakan game,

so became a solid base for *The Suffering*. Nevertheless, the game's transition from third person to first proved one of the most demanding requirements for the proprietary engine. "One thing that always bugged me about third-person games was not being able to look at things in the immediate way you can in first-person games," explains Rouse of the divergent viewpoints. "It started out as a 'look' mode, which a few third-person games did back then, but then we didn't want to go into look mode and not be able to move. So we added moving. And why should that movement be slower? And why not let the player then be able to shoot their guns too?" In a perfect example of feature creep, ultimately *The Suffering* could be played in either perspective, letting players choose their preferred viewpoint for themselves. "It was one of the more challenging parts to work with from both an art and coding perspective as well," remembers Hardman. "We were all fans of the different views, but we wanted the best of both worlds. I still have mixed feelings about it, I liked the idea and end result, but also feel we could have made the game much tighter with just one perspective."

Yet despite the novel twin-viewpoint, it was *The Suffering*'s horror themes and other monstrous elements that set the game apart. Top of the tree was the idea that the choices the player made throughout the game would affect not only the ending, but also Torque's origin story. Key to this was a morality system that, while lacking an on-screen meter, worked in the background, analysing Torque's actions and adjusting the game subtly. "There were some behind-the-scenes calculations," says Rouse, "and that manifested itself in terms of shifting story elements and dialogue, as well as the decay on the family picture in your inventory, and even Torque's skin tone. And of course, what ending you achieved, and what 'past' you got." In essence, the truth of the main character's crimes is ultimately revealed – was


Enemies lurk in the darkness everywhere in *The Suffering*.


Right from its very beginning, *The Suffering* doesn't hold back.







THE SUFFERING FACT FILE

MORE NEED-TO-KNOW FACTS ON THIS PRISON HELL

- Development on *The Suffering* took 27 months and the game used Surreal's proprietary engine, Riot.
- The lead platform was PlayStation 2.
- The game's amazing sound was led by Boyd Post alongside composer Erik Aho.
- *The Suffering* features in Richard Rouse III's book, *Game Design Theory & Practice*.
- As part of the arrangement with Stan Winston, an option for a movie based on *The Suffering* was considered, but never got far.
- Richard Rouse listened to a constant stream of metal and hip hop music while working on *The Suffering*, including Public Enemy, Rage Against The Machine and System Of A Down.
- An extra segment at the start of the game was added, then removed. Explains Rouse, "There was a concern from Midway that the start was too slow. I wasn't opposed to this, but after we did it, everybody, including Midway, decided they liked the slower start, so we cut it."
- The initial design of Torque's rage monster was less than scary according to Hardman. "We wanted him scary, but not as horrible as the other monsters. Unfortunately he looked like he was from the movie *Monsters Inc.*!" Character design artists Ben Olson and Aaron Coberly were responsible for the much-improved final result, along with input from Stan Winston.
- FX lead Joe Olson spent much of his time working on getting *The Suffering*'s many blood splatters looking authentic. He'd often come in to work with crimson paint splattered on himself.
- Art lead Jerusha Hardman was pregnant during the final part of production. "I remember finding it amusing we would have meetings entitled 'Blood and Gore' and then I'd go home and paint Winnie The Pooh on the nursery room wall!"
- The missing early part of the game is available as an unlockable upon completion of *The Suffering*. This is because the team felt all their work on 'Waiting To Die' should not go to waste.

he wrongly incarcerated, or guilty as hell? "I feel it worked out pretty well," continues Rouse. "We made it more complex for the sequel, and it got too hard for players to really understand what was going on. But for the first game, I look back at the simplicity and think it worked much better."

The Suffering's monsters, a vital part of the game given its premise, gained an added dimension after being modelled on forms of execution on death row, and also served to reflect how horrific the concept of capital punishment still is. "I've been disturbed, and to be honest horrified by the continued existence of the death penalty in the US," opines Rouse, "so thought it was rich for exploitation as a horror theme. It was also a subject I wanted to shine a light on and get people talking about." Monsters included the common slayer (execution origin, beheading), marksman (firing squad) and mainliner (lethal injection) and each had to be dealt with in different ways, despite their common theming. But perhaps the most surprising feature was the player character's own transformation into an unholy beast, capable of massive destruction, yet at the same time vulnerable. Rouse expands on how Torque's bestial side came about. "Early on I remember feeling like there just wasn't quite enough to the game in terms of player abilities and mechanics. The player could shoot, do melee attacks and some light puzzle solving, but I just wanted there to be one more system for the player to utilise." Narratively, the 'hero' of the game already had a sanity issue – he couldn't remember his past and was being confronted by many horrific things. Continues Rouse, "Torque's got a raging violent side – so it made sense to play that up in losing his mind." The character's transformation into a rampaging beast occurs after he has slain a certain number of monsters. As well as being near-invulnerable to external damage, Torque can also perform a powerful shockwave attack and literally tear his enemies apart. But there's a pyrrhic caveat. "So the player got a different gameplay mode," notes Rouse, "but I was always proud of the fact that if you overused it you would die." The longer Torque remained in his bestial form, the more his health deteriorated. Only able to heal himself in human form, if he remained in the former for too long, death would inevitably arrive.

Rouse and Hardman both praise designers Ben Olson and Aaron Coberly with the superb design of the penitentiary's demonic inhabitants. Yet a notable credit for *The Suffering* was the famous movie monster creator, Stan Winston. With a CV boasting work such as *Jurassic Park*, *Predator* and *The Terminator*, Winston's role on the Surreal game was a political machination engineered by publisher Midway. "So for this one you need to understand that there are politics in the game industry," reveals Hardman. "Midway wanted Stan Winston's name connected to the project, but by the time his studios were involved we had already created several passes at the creatures." Most of the creature designs had already been drawn and modelled by Olson and Coberly, and put before the game design team to determine which suited the story best. Continues Hardman, "Richard and I flew out to meet with Stan Winston Studios and I will say it was a pleasure, and an honour to meet him before he sadly passed away. They did assign a few artists to add some input on the designs, and I worked hand-in-hand with them for a while. But… I must be honest, those characters were Ben Olson's all the way." However, as Rouse recalls, Winston did have one major input into an important character in *The Suffering*. "Stan did not like the version of the Torque insanity creature that we had at that point. I recall him saying it looked like it was made out of mashed potatoes. When he said that, Jerusha and I immediately saw his point and agreed to get him redone from scratch." Despite Stan Winston Studios' lack of direct tangible contribution, its feedback ended up proving crucial to the look of the player's alternate insanity mode.



The Suffering can be also be played in first-person mode.


The common slayer monster, modelled on execution by beheading.



Torque picks up his first weapon, a makeshift knife called a shiv.

> A GAMING EVOLUTION

Silent Hill 2 > The Suffering: Ties That Bind > The Evil Within



Silent Hill 2's tone and grimy interiors was a big influence on the look and feel of *The Suffering*.



The Evil Within's depressing scenery and vision-like state echoes much of *The Suffering*'s uninviting locations.




Torque can tap into CCTV cameras to get an idea of what lies ahead.


Despite an understandable suspicion of Torque, this guard eventually regards him less of a threat than the prison's other inhabitants.

With Midway supportive of Surreal's endeavours, development proceeded smoothly. "It's kinda shocking how well it went actually," laughs Rouse, "and it remains the best of any development experience I've had, with the smallest amount of reworked content." That's not to say it wasn't hectic, with 16-hour days common for most of the team. "My day usually consisted of three to four hours of meetings with either the other leads or directors," remembers Hardman. "And then meeting with my artists throughout the day. I also spent time at my desk on environment art, with evenings eyeball-deep in the schedule to make adjustments and see how far behind we were. Some days would just be taken up with meeting with the publisher when they were in town." By far the biggest issue as far as the art lead was concerned was the developer's metaphorical eyes being bigger than its stomach. "We wanted to do everything!" she exclaims. "And make it within budget! But it's hard as an artist, because it's really easy to fall down the 'wouldn't it be cool if…' rabbit hole. I learned to really hate that phrase; by the end of the project I would always say, 'wouldn't it be really cool if we shipped the game…'

...IT'S HARD AS AN ARTIST, BECAUSE IT'S REALLY EASY TO FALL DOWN THE 'WOULDN'T IT BE COOL IF…' RABBIT HOLE. I LEARNED TO REALLY HATE THAT PHRASE
JERUSHA HARDMAN

After a slip of a few months on the insistence of its publisher, *The Suffering* was released in the March of 2004. "Midway said they liked the game, and wanted to give it more time," recalls Rouse. "This allowed us to add Torque's family to the game as 3D models and was really an ideal situation – we had the game mostly done, so then could just make it a bit better." To the development team's relief, multiplayer was never even brought up by its publisher. "The original *Drakan* had a multiplayer mode that was a lot of work, and no-one ever played," laments Rouse. "As a result its sequel had none, and nobody ever talked about adding 'bolt on' multiplayer to *The Suffering*. Thank God!"

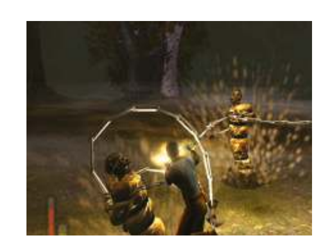
Rouse estimates that *The Suffering* sold more than a million copies across its platforms. With the game also featuring highly on rental charts, and given away latterly for various promotions, he's more than content that millions of people likely played Surreal's game. "And I think that's pretty cool for a weird little horror game. I mean, overall I feel good about the story of the game, but when I listen to some parts I think 'yeah I could have written that a bit better'. It's got a unique serious-but-campy tone that doesn't always balance on that line perfectly." Despite it seemingly lacking directly from Midway, there was plenty of pressure on the dev team, says Hardman. "We joked the game was appropriately named – but honestly, all the pain and long hours taken into account, I still look back on those days and smile. It was like high school – painful and messy, but we had so much fun." **games™** leaves final thoughts to *The Suffering*'s chief designer and writer, industry veteran Richard Rouse. "I've been involved with or consulted on a lot of games since then, and I can honestly say it was the smoothest running project I've ever been on. At the time it doesn't seem that way, of course, but compared to other projects it was a rare case of us designing a game out, and then making it – and it turning out pretty well too."



WHAT THEY SAID…

When the game really gets truckin', it's a frantic, guns-blazing affair through the darkened and decaying corridors of one of the scariest settings in gaming history

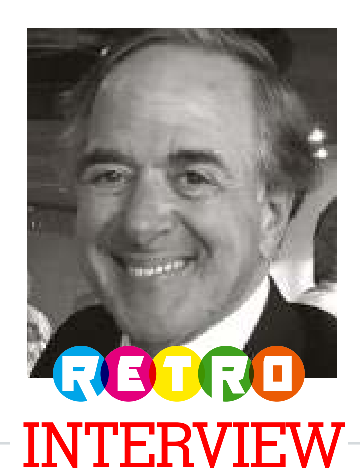
IGN Review



TECHNOFEAR

games™ talks to Patrick Betremieux, lead programmer on The Suffering

"I LIKED HORROR games, and also the idea of the transforming main character. Coming out of *Drakan 2*, it was also a nice change of pace from the medieval fantasy world. The lead version was PS2, as the engine from that console was already up and running from *Drakan 2*. Technically, AI was the biggest problem as I recall. We had one AI programmer, and he was split between this and *Lord Of The Rings*. What was good for open landscape fighting didn't really work well in the closed hallway environments of *The Suffering*, so there was a lot of tweaking there. But I was very pleased with the finished game. It was my first (and only) lead programmer position, and the one I'm the proudest of. And although it might only have a small following, those who played it loved it, and that's always a good feeling."



RETRO INTERVIEW

MICHAEL KATZ

As well as heading up Sega of America, Michael Katz worked for some of the biggest names in videogaming during the Eighties from Mattel and Coleco to Epyx and Atari

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



ColecoVision [1982] Vice President, Marketing, Coleco



Atari 2600 Jr [1986] President, video games division, Atari



Sega Genesis/ Mega Drive [1989] President, Sega of America

YOU BEGAN TO make your mark in gaming almost from its very beginnings in 1979. What was the industry like at that time, in terms of what was being achieved?

In the late 1970s, it was all about arcade games and the beginning of Atari. It had achieved dramatic success, along with several Japanese and American companies, in stand up coin-op arcade games but *Pong* and then the 2600 console were magical. All of a sudden in Sunnyvale – or Silicon Valley, as its known – there was this character called Nolan Bushnell, who became a god-like inventor and entrepreneur and there was a multi-million dollar company. It had a staff of game designers, engineers, artists and musicians who lived a "counter culture" life working 24-hours-a-day, sometimes rarely sleeping, shaving or bathing.

When you moved from Mattel to Coleco, did you see gaming as a new type of toy?

I saw electronic games as the future of playing games and that's why I asked the electronics design group at Mattel to design a prototype product that was the size of a portable electric calculator that used LED technology and could play games. That prototype became the Genesis of handheld electronic games, starting a multi-million dollar category for Mattel and for the toy and games category.

What were your thoughts about the 1982 ColecoVision home games console and how did you seek to position it, from a marketing point of view?

ColecoVision was third generation after Atari and Intellivision. We positioned it as the new state-of-the-art game system with better graphics, sound and animation.

It also had greater realism and a great software library including a home version of *Donkey Kong* – the only chance consumers could play the game for up to nine months. Smart? We thought so.

WE SOLD THE HELL OUT OF THE ATARI 2600 FOR $49.95

Which rivals worried you and how did you seek to tackle those fears?

When I was at Coleco, in the early Eighties, both Mattel and Atari/Warner were not strongly supporting the future development of their home game systems, so we thought we would be in good shape if we could lock up some strong arcade titles through licensing agreements and have a more powerful 8-bit game system than them. That's how it turned out for Coleco for several years.

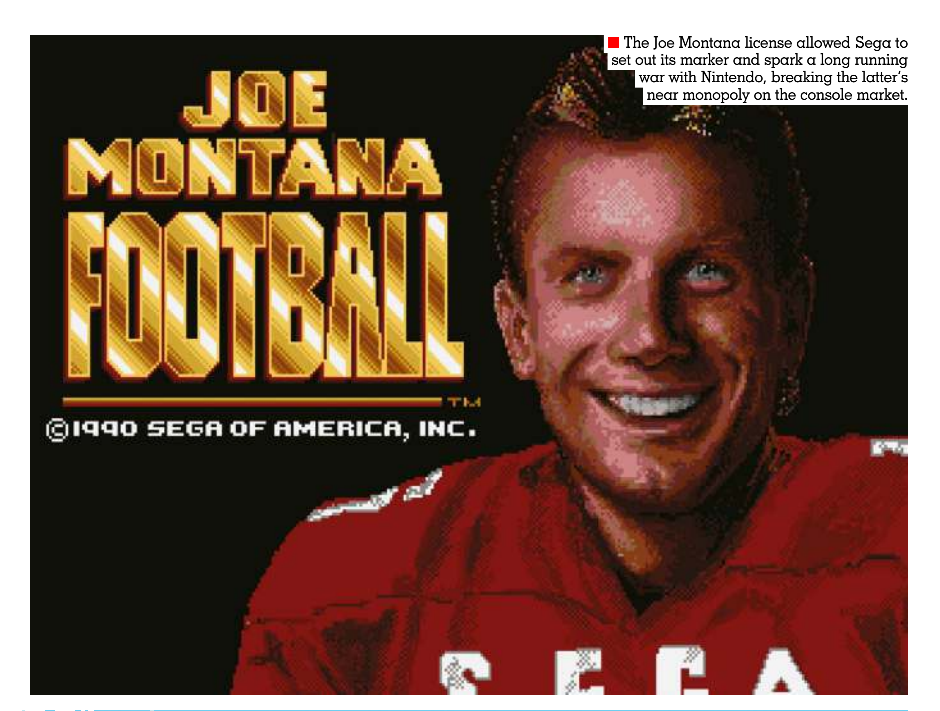
It was quite a daring industry with a lot of behind-the-scenes manoeuvring. One result was the Atari adaptor for ColecoVision: where did that idea come from and how did you treat it within Coleco: was it a way of intensifying a rivalry to a degree?

We felt that game owners would be hesitant to try ColecoVision or switch to ColecoVision because they had a big investment in Atari cartridges. So it seemed wise to offer an adaptor with the ColecoVision system that allowed gamers to

QUARTERS FOR QUARTERBACKS

"The former American football quarterback Joe Montana did well from his deal with Sega under Michael Katz. "He got an advance on his royalties of $1.2 million, if memory serves me, and he ended up receiving more than $3.5 million over the first three years alone," Katz says. "Also, when the game's development fell behind schedule, I phoned Tripp Hawkins at EA and he gave us his backup Joe Madden game design. That became our Genesis *Joe Montana Football 1* (a little known fact)."





■ The Joe Montana license allowed Sega to set out its marker and spark a long running war with Nintendo, breaking the latter's near monopoly on the console market.

play Atari games on their new Coleco system. It meant they only had to deal with one game system which was simpler and more convenient, with fewer wires and less space taken up.

Why did you decide to move to Epyx and what was the company like when you joined?
I had never heard of Epyx but I learned from their headhunters and investors that it was a very strategic computer games company with serious computer gamers, that it was not growing, losing money, and had a founder who knew very little about the mass market for games and very little interest in turning his company into a dynamic, aggressive, mass-market, action-games oriented software company. This is what the VC's wanted the owner to be and do, and they asked if I was interested in taking over. After a lot of due diligence and soul-searching, I said yes, because I thought I was up to the challenge and thought I had the skills and experience to turn the company around, reposition it with mass market consumers, and grow it and make it profitable relatively quickly.

What do you remember most at Epyx?
I remember creating a line of action-strategy games as our new hot category and direction, and creating a shared royalty and commission scheme for our game designers. We repackaged all of the products in distinctive black and gold; we were named the best company at the Spring CES Show in Chicago; we merged with a small software company called Starpath and developed the winning *Summer Games*, *Winter Games*, *California Games* line-up; and we made Geoff Brown at US Gold the European distributor for Epyx.

Interestingly, given you'd worked at Coleco, you ended up as president of the video games division at Atari. How did that come about and what were you asked to do?
After our successes of 1983-85 at Epyx, our VC investors board members were reluctant to expand the company into more than just a computer game company, while I was interested in innovative new game hardware, and "entertainment electronics" type of products. You may remember Worlds Of Wonder which was founded by former Atari employees? It had success with Teddy Ruxpin and Laser Tag and I wanted to get into the same sort of thing. So when Jack Tramiel (the founder of Commodore and the buyer of Atari from Warner) asked me to join Atari Corporation in Sunnyvale and become president of the Video Games Division and Head of an Entertainment Electronics Division, I said yes. He wanted me to help out with sales and marketing in the computer side and a lot of stock options in the newly public Atari Corp was attractive.

Atari was continuing to push the 2600 and 7800 at a time when the NES was introduced. Was this a mistake?

EPYX TIMES

"At the time I joined, Epyx was a small company, with fewer than 50 employees, doing under $2 million in sales. But the owner turned out to be an obstructionist, and he tried to sabotage the company's new direction and efforts. Despite this, within seven months, we increased sales to more than $7 million dollars, became profitable, added several product lines, repositioned the company's image and marketing approach, increased distribution, hired Apple's ad agency to be our ad agency and outsold Electronic Arts in the computer, action-game market," says Katz.

■ California Games was one of the biggest hits for Epyx, which Katz headed as president from September 1983 until September 1985

Atari was following the non-disclosed strategy of squeezing as much profit out of the video games division as it could in order to fund Jack's pet project: development of the newly developed, ill-fated ST computer line. So we downsized the 2600 in order to reach an under-$50 price point for the mass market and we brought back the popular old cartridges. We sold the hell out of the 2600 for $49.95 and the cartridges for under $15 and we introduced six to seven new cartridges based on our licensing of hot computer game titles from other publishers in order to sell as many 7800s as possible.

The result was that we supplied a lot of profits to support the computer line but the computer retail outlets didn't want the new, low-priced computer. The mistake was Jack not allowing Atari and I to license the Genesis from Dave Rosen and Hayao Nakayama. They had come to see me, asking if Atari would like to buy the rights to the Genesis from Sega, because Sega was not interested in being in the hardware business. Jack had agreed before changing his mind. Sega was not happy and neither was I but Jack did not like the videogames business.

What did you do?

I took a sabbatical for three months after resigning from Atari and travelled around the world. I think I hit about 15 Club Meds on three different continents. There were many places I had always wanted to visit and it was a good time to do it. I also figured people would have to talk to me because I was travelling solo. It was great, enjoying beautiful locations.

But you then became president of Sega of America. Why did you join?

When I returned, Dave Rosen, co-chairman and founder of Sega, was living in Los Angeles and he asked me if I would like to become President of Sega US and basically start and build a formal US HQ and take over the launch of Genesis. I said yes, because I like challenges. I had become somewhat of an expert at start-ups and turn-arounds, and I certainly knew the business. I also knew something about being in second place and trying to dislodge a first place company because I did it at Mattel, Coleco and Epyx.

What did you think about the Master System, that had been introduced a few years earlier?

I thought nothing about the Master System. It was a non-issue. It was not significant, competitively, at any of the companies I had represented. But I saw Sega and Genesis as a more powerful 16-bit system than Nintendo's 8-bit and I thought about going head-on against Nintendo with a bold, competitive marketing campaign, just as we had when I got to Coleco. I felt that if we could develop great software – it's all about the games – and be aggressive in-your-face marketers that we could make a dent in Nintendo's 90 per cent share of the market.

What made you think that?

We had a console that could come closer to the real-world arcade-style look, feel and realism than Nintendo. But we needed the games, and Sega in the US did not even have an internal game development department.

Would it be fair to say that Sega didn't really have an identity in the home market either?

Yes, that's a fair assumption. I knew we had to take Nintendo on head-to-head, so I told our ad agency that we needed a very strong competitive approach against Nintendo, which, initially was a battle, to get through, because it was considered culturally inappropriate for a Japanese company to take a public, competitive marketing stance against another company. But, finally, after telling the ad agency "no", enough times, they realised there was a "new sheriff" in town and they came up with the perfect marketing slogan: Genesis Does What Nintendon't.

Was it an honest and substantive statement?

Well, yes. We had the game system that was more powerful and therefore graphically more realistic with better sound, action graphics and memory. But what about "hot" software? That was our problem because Nintendo, throughout their relationships with all of the hot Japanese arcade game companies, had a lock on the good arcade titles.

I KNEW WE HAD TO TAKE NINTENDO ON HEAD-TO-HEAD... WE NEEDED A VERY STRONG COMPETITIVE APPROACH

Without hot games, we couldn't launch a hot new system. So making "Genesis Does What Nintendon't" into a meaningful message to current Nintendo owners and first time console buyers was crucial for us.

Which licenses were you most proud of?

Well, we felt the answer was getting hot, well-known, personalities from the worlds of sports and entertainment to exclusively represent Sega, the new upstart console. We already had a relationship with Michael Jackson, basketball coach Pat Riley and baseball coach Tommy La Sorda, so we had a headstart in personality licenses. But we went after the best known and liked US Football star in the NFL, namely Joe Montana, to tie-in with the first Christmas of the Sega Genesis in America. I convinced the Japanese to let me go after Joe, and we quickly beat Nintendo for the license. Joe became the football spokesman over the next five years for Genesis and he helped define that slogan we were using.

What was the market like for the Genesis in the beginning?

Sega US was attempting to build a strong internal software development group and we wanted to substantially strengthen the sales and marketing departments.

Unfortunately, it is harder and takes longer to strengthen an organisation than we would like, so it was not easy to get substantial retail distribution for Sega Genesis in the first nine to 12 months of its introduction, because the ten key videogame console retailers were risk-averse and reluctant to take on a new system and a new software library when their existing brand, Nintendo, had a 90 percent share of the [console] market.

So, it took the first nine months to gain consumer acceptance from early adopters, to increase the reach of the TV advertising, to gain key retailer willingness to stock a new system, and to build the software library.

Why did you ultimately leave Sega and what did you think about your immediate replacement, Tom Kalinske?

Sega CEO Nakayama-san felt that, in the first 12 months of the Genesis' introduction, I should have been able to sell at least one million units in the USA. I was replaced by Kalinske, who I had known from Mattel, because he had a prior relationship with Nakayama, and I guess he was respected by him.

My reaction to the CEOs of companies is very simple: there are CEOs who do some of the work and find it necessary to take most of the credit. And then there are CEOs who do much of the work and don't care who gets the credit. I have made it a point in my career of trying to follow the later example. As a result, if I think I have done all that could have been achieved, I have no regrets.

What did you move on to after leaving Sega and the Genesis behind?

After my Sega tenure, I thought it would be fun and interesting to found and run a headhunting firm, just for the videogames industry, be my own boss, be out of the corporate structure, and help good people get good jobs. I placed hundreds of candidates into more than 50 prominent companies and I did it for ten years.

What do you do now?

I have been semi-retired for more than 15 years now and I enjoy cruising the world, spending time with family and playing a little tennis. If I felt that the new generation of games industry leaders thought they could learn something from the pioneers and experts of yesterday, I would be happy to help them. Other than the medium that the games are delivered on, or pass through, not a lot has really changed to make the consumer aware and happy.

Game director and writer Ken Levine is part of the Looking Glass Studios alumni, cutting his teeth on *System Shock 2* and *Thief: The Dark Project*.

GAME CHANGERS

BIOSHOCK

Released: Irrational Games **Publisher:** 2K Games **Developer:** 21 August 2007 **System:** Xbox 360

An unforgettable adventure cast beneath the waves, it was BioShock's immeasurably enjoyable shooting and unforgettable narrative that make it one of the most important releases of the last decade

"WOULD YOU KINDLY?" On the surface, it was always a simple quandary to wrestle with. We answered the call dutifully, locking ourselves into a wicked sense of forward momentum at the whim of an omnipotent narrator, pushing ourselves ever deeper into a submerged metropolis steadily taking on more and more water. But, as *BioShock* players would soon discover in the autumn of 2007, the question itself was loaded. A smoke-and-mirrors tactic that has come to define a certain era of first-person shooters – particularly in the hearts and hands of console-bound gamers.

ONE OF THE GREATEST MAGIC TRICKS GAME DEVELOPERS EVER PULLED OFF WAS MAKING IT FEEL AS IF YOU EVER WERE FREE INSIDE OF THEIR WORLDS

One of the greatest magic tricks game developers ever pulled off was making it feel as if you ever were free inside of their worlds. There is, in any player-driven narrative experience – be it linear or otherwise – merely the illusion of choice and control. The medium is inevitably limited by the amount of content a team is able to create and implement; making players believe that they have even the slightest amount of influence on how events and story unfolds is all a part of a good narrative. *BioShock* turned this on its head entirely. It turned a trusted narrator against us; it forced us to confront the relationship between the

MOST TERRIFYING FOES

THE SCARIEST ENEMIES YOU'LL ENCOUNTER ON YOUR TRIP THROUGH RAPTURE



SPLICERS

★ ADAM may have once represented a bright future for Rapture, but it quickly led to disarray after armies of plasmid-infused began to form. Smart, agile and tough in packs, the Splicers, once overdosing citizens, are formidable terrors throughout the entirety of *BioShock*.



BIG DADDIES

★ The Big Daddies were humans surgically grafted into giant diving suits, psychologically compelled to protect the Little Sisters at all costs. Affectionately named "Mr Bubbles" by their wards, if you saw one of these charging at you, you just knew you were in for a tough battle.



THE WORLD

★ Enclosed in a bathysphere, the world of Rapture, was a nightmare in its own right. Rich in detail, the city was used as a vehicle to tell the stories of the citizens long after they had departed. You know what they say: there ain't no party like New Year's Eve in Rapture circa 1958.

sentience of the protagonist and the invisible guiding hand of the developer.

While the late game twist forced players to consider their own agency – to weigh up the numerous violations of trust and our inherent inability to question them throughout – the world of Rapture is appropriately established to drive reactive player emotion from the moment that the bathysphere first opens its doors. It's a beautiful, wondrous place; its rusting 1950s aesthetic inviting us to explore the chaos beneath the waves, begging you to hope that the wrench you get your hands on will one day have another use besides beating in skulls – that perhaps by the end of this you can restore Rapture to its former glory. But soon that feeling is replaced with something else entirely: oppressive, aggressive fear. As, one by one, the layers are peeled back on the city, its citizens and the dark politics fuelling the disarray, any hope you have is quickly replaced by a desire to escape it all as quickly as humanly possible.

On your way to freedom, guided by the warring of words between Atlas and Fontaine, empathy with the citizens of Rapture is established, largely through environmental storytelling. It's the first of many emotional tethers Irrational Games creates throughout the experience as it builds towards its twist reveal. While this manifested itself in fairly rote fashion – rooting through bins and listening to scattered audio diaries across the world – it helped the world feel *real*, like it had existed before you arrived and that it would continue to be after you eventually left it all behind. Forcing you to empathise with the very villains you were so intent on crushing only made the emotional moments – between deciding whether you would save the tortured Little Sisters or harvest them for resources – all the more impactful.

KEY FACTS

■ Rapture actually exists on Google Maps. Visit the coordinates 63' 2' North 29' 55' West and you'll find the site of the infamous Lighthouse. It's very cool, although we advise you keep your distance from it at all costs.

■ The philosophy behind the creation of Rapture is heavily inspired by the works of Ayn Rand, and many of her concepts and ideas can be seen throughout the world and the story of *BioShock*.

BioShock brought the immersive sim to console in a way that we hadn't quite experienced before. The game does invariably share its DNA with the likes of *System Shock* and its sequel, on which director Ken Levine first cut his teeth, and that ensured that *BioShock* had a proficiency to its core systems lost on many other genre games of the time. The feel of the weapons, their combination with the array of otherworldly Plasmids at your disposal, was a real delight. The action was fast and kinetic, but nuanced enough to let us experiment with the tools you had found along the way – the enemy AI smart and aggressive, the depth to the combat system only expanding the further you dared push it. Seeing a Big Daddy wade into battle was forever a thrill, particularly as the various warring factions would converge as if by completely accident. *BioShock* offered some of the biggest thrills the infant console generation had seen, and its impact on the story-driven shooter is difficult to quantify.

Its lacklustre ending aside, *BioShock* was able to convincingly tell a story that any other medium would struggle to deliver. Irrational capitalised on the strength of the interactive format and delivered a narrative that is as challenging as it is unique; in playing with perception, trust and consequence, *BioShock* made players more aware of their agency than ever before. To be betrayed by your own actions – your own lack of awareness or perception – was startling. The action and combat sublime, the character development and world-building unrivalled. A decade on and it's as wonderful today as it was then; *BioShock* is a startling example of what can be achieved when a bold vision is achieved wholeheartedly by a group of passionate creatives.

GAME CHANGERS

EIGHT GAMES THAT USE GUILT AS A WEAPON

GAMES THAT HAVE BETTERED THEMSELVES BY MAKING US FEEL AWFUL ABOUT OURSELVES



BIOSHOCK

From its introduction of the orphaned Little Sisters, and the Big Daddies compelled to guard them, to the overdosing citizens turned Splicers that populate Rapture's sunken corridors, *BioShock* is fraught with guilt and gunplay. We are kindly asked to do all we can to survive, but such a mission is undercut by human tragedy at every step. Empathy makes you reconsider your instinctive violent tendencies, even if playing the good guy ultimately de-powers you in an increasingly dangerous situation.



SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

An almost constant assault on your conscience, *Shadow Of The Colossus* finds real pleasure in making you feel awful about your decisions. In its ancient world, populated by 16 fragile titans, you are tasked with slaying them one after the other in an effort to save a single fading light. By the time you come to understand how selfish your actions are it's already too late. You are an evil upon the land, and no amount of stunning vistas, gorgeous music, or evocative battles can do anything to distract from that fact.



PAPERS, PLEASE

Games have often struggled to make players engage with remorse, though *Papers, Please* manages it without skipping a beat. Putting you the position of a border guard attempting to process immigrants seeking entry to a repressive regime, it wastes no time in making you contort your duties in an effort to support your own family. It's a profound game that makes you weigh the lives of others against your own personal goals, and all that you'll be left with is an overwhelming sense of guilt by the time it closes out.



TLOZ: LINK'S AWAKENING

While *Link's Awakening* is fun enough – tasking you with collecting eight instruments to banish an evil that is overtaking an otherwise pleasant land – it's the final moments that really establish it as a true classic. Collecting and playing the instruments will indeed banish the evil, but at a price; the guardian of the world, a large wind fish, reveals that the entire island is actually its dream – completing your mission will erase the evil, but it will also wake the fish from its slumber and erase the world from existence.



SPEC OPS: THE LINE

Spec Ops isn't a game that you enjoy, it's an experience that you persevere with against your better judgement. A shooter with something to say, *Spec Ops* was hell-bent on making you confront the horrors of war – many of which stem from your action or inaction. The experience is dotted with moments that create an overwhelming sense of guilt. When faced with a mission like White Phosphorous you don't complete it, you *survive* it. It's a game that challenges convention and delivers an important message.



THIS WAR OF MINE

In a word, *gruelling*. *This War Of Mine* is a tactfully produced strategy sim that tasks you with guiding a group of civilians through the aftermath of a war-torn city. Forcing you to monitor every aspect of their being, from depression to despondency, to forcing you into moral quandaries in an effort to survive at all costs, *This War Of Mine* is relentless in its efforts to humanise digital violence and struggle. Guilt is used as a metric of people management, with every action having some kind of irrepressible reaction.



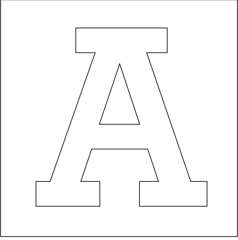
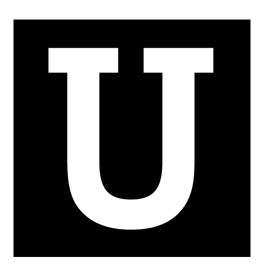
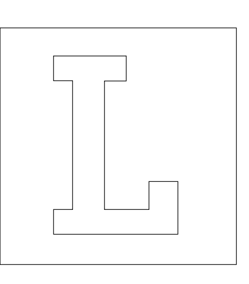
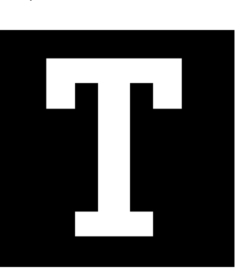
XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

Firaxis devised a simple but effective way of forcing you to connect with your fire-team in *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* on more than a surface level. Many of us quickly took to using the customisation systems to name soldiers after friends, an idea that turns into a huge mistake. Players begin to impart their buddies' personalities onto the characters, changing the way you approach play and situations, with their inevitable wounding and death carrying more weight than if they were faceless soldiers of war.



THE WALKING DEAD

Where would Telltale be without guilt? The company reversed its fortunes by realising it could make us feel bloody awful about ourselves. *The Walking Dead* is still perhaps the best example of this, where we are asked to choose between two impossible decisions – who to save or sacrifice is a tool the game makes great use of. In using moral, social and societal consequence as a game mechanic, Telltale puts guilt at the heart of its experience to help build a narrative that is gripping from start to finish.

SMARTBOY

MANUFACTURER: **HYPERKIN** PRICE: **£59.99**

AS RETRO GAMING SOLUTIONS GO THE SMARTBOY IS AN INTERESTING MIX OF SEEMINGLY CONFLICTING IDEAS. It's a device that is at once elegant in how it goes about making classic Game Boy and Game Boy Color games playable on any Android smartphone and yet it's also somewhat industrial in its design. There's a stoic practicality to how it operates and yet its attention to detail is impeccable.

In terms of operation, the SmartBoy lives up to its name. Plugging into any Android phone with a USB Type-C port (specifically, it was designed with the Samsung Galaxy S8 in mind) it enables you to play any Game Boy or Game Boy Color cartridges through any downloaded emulator on your device. It defaults to the app *My Oldboy,* but any emulator should work as the SmartBoy reads the data from your cartridge and adds it temporarily to the app to play. Once you remove the cartridge the data is deleted.

This whole process gets around the many issues surrounding copyright infringement or piracy. You're not ripping data from games – just playing cartridges you already own. And the games look fantastic on modern smartphone screens. Colour games, in particular, really shine on the edge-to-edge displays that some Android phones now boast.

The device itself is a mixed bag in terms of its design. The button layout and feel is fantastic, matching the original 'brick' Game Boy pretty closely. The spacing of all the inputs is also very close to the original, so you should feel right at home with it in your hands. The bulkiness of the device – which is kind of unavoidable given its functionality – actually makes it much more cumbersome than the original handheld. Likewise the practicality of its design, allowing for different sizes of phone, means that it's not the most aesthetically pleasing device with gaps down the side and a rather square, angular look.

These are rather petty criticisms though for what is a very well-realised device. Its intention and appeal is very specific, but it does its job exceptionally.

VERDICT 8/10

■ The button feel on the SmartBoy is impressively close to that of Nintendo's original handheld, which makes it all the more fun to play classic Game Boy games. We're curious to see if Hyperkin might look to support a Game Boy Advance device next.

■ The SmartBoy is compatible with both Game Boy and Game Boy colour cartridges so if you already have some of those around and you're up to date with your Android phone you've got a great device here to take advantage of.

WINTER WARMERS



HYRULE KNIT HOODIE

SOLD BY: **MUSTERBRAND** PRICE: **€69**

Musterbrand has a whole range of *Breath Of The Wild* inspired clothing options right now, all of which play on that line between cosplay and everyday wear. There are some fantastic interpretations of the style from the game available and this one is a great example.

www.musterbrand.com



COUNTER-STRIKE BEANIE

SOLD BY: **MUSTERBRAND** PRICE: **€29**

More branded excellence from Musterbrand, this time giving you something that not only keeps your head – and hopefully the tips of your ears – covered from the cold, but also declares your love of one of gaming's most enduring competitive shooters. Not so great as camouflage, though.

www.musterbrand.com



CROWBAR KNIT PULLOVER

SOLD BY: **MUSTERBRAND** PRICE: **€89**

Simple and effective, we doubt that you'll find a more fitting celebration of Gordon Freeman's favourite melee companion in sweater form. Perhaps that's rather specific, but you've got to love some of the detailing on this pullover. It's a classy little number

www.musterbrand.com



HEATHER VAULT 111 HOODIE

SOLD BY: **BETHSOFT** PRICE: **$49.99**

Bethesda's official store has some excellent hoodies and these angled designs are particularly cool. While the Dark Brotherhood variant is pretty good, this tribute to *Fallout 4* gets our pick for the best of the bunch. Nice details, such as a Fallout logo zipper really tie the whole thing together.

store.bethsoft.com



MIYAMOTO STREET HOODIE

SOLD BY: **GAMETEE** PRICE: **£14.99**

All hail the godfather of gaming with this super-stylish hoodie emblazoned with the legend that is maker of Mario, Miyamoto. Frankly, we would never have imagined that streetwear would ever be so appealing to such a bunch of fashion illiterate idiots as us, but here we are.

www.gametee.co.uk



RESIDENT EVIL BIOHAZARD HOODIE

SOLD BY: **THINKGEEK** PRICE: **$49.99**

You would think that getting a stylish STARS Raccoon City police department hoodie like this would require you to spend some time in RCPD training, but thankfully this little number can be yours for just a few clams. No need to go hunting infected zombies or searching creepy mansions.

www.thinkgeek.com



OVERWATCH D.VA BUNNY GAME FACE SWEATSHIRT

SOLD BY: **THINKGEEK** PRICE: **$39.99**

D.Va is like our gaming spirit animal so it seems only right that we would want to warm our spirits and our torsos with her bunny icon emblazoned on our person. This is a pretty simple design, but it treads that line between inconspicuously nerdy and eye-catching.

www.thinkgeek.com



UNDERTALE HUMAN SHIRT

SOLD BY: **FANGAMER** PRICE: **$36**

Of all the recent indie gaming hits, *Undertale* isn't one where we would have thought a fashion item would emerge, but the classic jumper of the RPG's lead actually translates rather nicely to the real world. It's a pretty inside joke for those in the know, but it's also a funny one.

www.fangamer.com

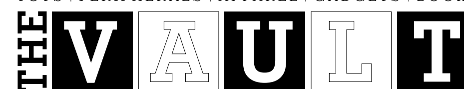
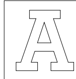


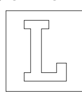
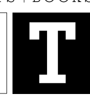
KART CREW JACKET

SOLD BY: **FANGAMER** PRICE: **$49**

If you like to spend your weekends drifting around corners, finding insane shortcuts and placing banana skins in all of the most challenging locations then clearly this jacket is going to be for you. The design isn't too obviously Mario Kart related, but it's packed with cool details.

www.fangamer.com

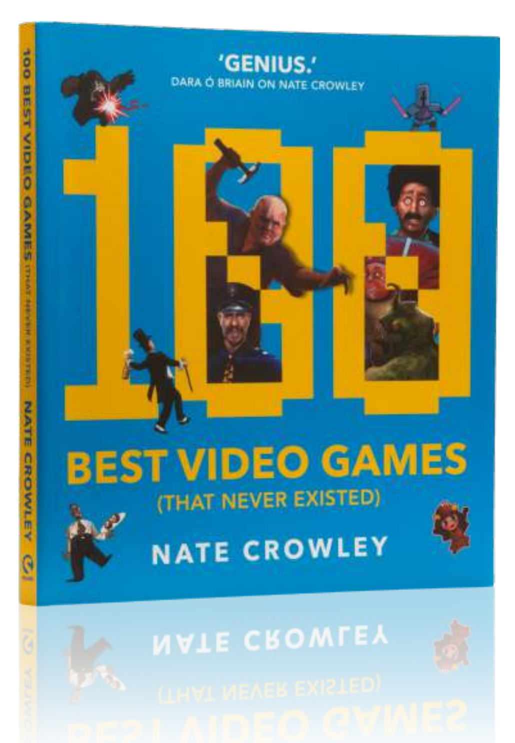





100 BEST VIDEO GAMES (THAT NEVER EXISTED)

PUBLISHER: **REBELLION**



WHILE WE MIGHT NOT HAVE NORMALLY EXPENDED MUCH TIME CONSIDERING A BOOK CONCERNED WITH FICTIONAL VIDEOGAMES, THIS PARTICULAR COLLECTION HAPPENS TO BE A RATHER WONDERFUL CELEBRATION OF THE ODDITY AND IDIOCY OF GAMING CULTURE OVER THE LAST 37 YEARS. Nate Crowley has compiled a quite extraordinary list of games that never existed and gone to the trouble of not only naming them, but also coming up with compelling descriptions of their content, reviews of the finished product and even snippets of content from the games themselves. What's more the entire book has been wonderfully illustrated with mocked-up screens from these classic games that never were, box art, concept art, and even images of the games running on well-known hardware.

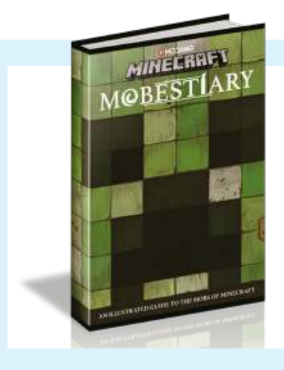
In terms of the writing itself, it is not only highly amusing throughout, but is also a rather scarily accurate pastiche of traditional games writing patter. Some of the back stories and histories Crowley has concocted are quite wonderfully convoluted and involved. Whether born of silly puns or the patently absurd, every game has an involved tale to tell. We can see this book being a goldmine for any game jam developers looking for some inspiration too.

In terms of design and layout this book is very simply collected and templated, giving it a nice traditional list book feel. As we have mentioned, some of the imagery is really fantastic, whether it's either wholly original or inspired by recognisable releases.

As something that's a little different from the usual game art or list collection, this is a very easy book to recommend.

www.amazon.co.uk

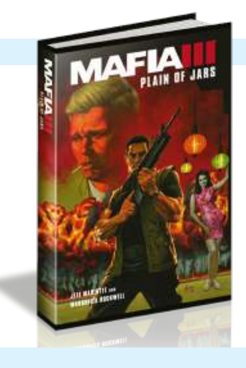
VERDICT 8/10



MINECRAFT MOBESTIARY

Written in the style of a wildlife expert travelling the wilds of *Minecraft*, this collection of observations and anatomy of the game's various creatures is a rather engrossing read. The *Minecraft* books are getting rather involved in their own little fictional universe now.

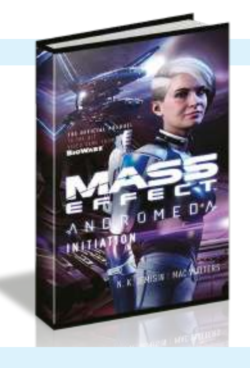
www.egmont.co.uk



MAFIA III: PLAIN OF JARS

If you were wondering exactly what Clay had been getting up to in Vietnam before he returned home to New Bordeaux to reclaim the streets and teach the local mob a few lessons, then this is the book you've been waiting for. This official prequel story delves into his backstory and army training.

www.insighteditions.com



MASS EFFECT: INITIATION

Setting aside whatever issues you might have with *Andromeda*, it had a fascinating cast and one of its most intriguing companions was Cora Harper, second in command to Alec Ryder, trained as an asari commando and ready to lead humanity in a new galaxy. This book follows her story.

www.titanbooks.com



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